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# Social identity construction of Muslim women: A case study

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**Social identity construction of Muslim women: A case study**

by

**Allison J. Severson**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Education (Higher Education)

Program of Study Committee:

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## **ABSTRACT**

While the number of Muslim college students is increasing, (Rasheed Ali & Bagheri, 2009), many are facing a severe misunderstanding of their faith that has been further distorted since 9/11 (Afridi & Carnegie Corp. of New York, 2001). This qualitative study focused on understanding the personal and religious experiences of four Muslim women in the context of a large research university in the Midwest United States. Using Siedman's (1991) three-interview series, all participants were interviewed three times as the primary means of data collection. Based on analysis of the collected data, three themes emerged as central to the participants' experiences: the role of prayer is varied but important, the influence of family in religious identity and expression, and the impact of environments on students' experiences and identity. The findings from this study provide examples and stories that will allow student affairs professionals and faculty members to better understand Muslim students. The findings from this study also lead to implications for creating inclusive learning environments for all students.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The exact number of Muslims in the U.S. is not known, though estimates range from 1.3 to 7 million (Forgrave, 2010). Muslims practice the religion of Islam, which according to Ba-Yunus and Kones (2006), is the second largest religion in the world. Muslims are the second-largest faith group in the United States, and Islam is the fastest growing religion in the U.S. However, according to a recent Pew Center poll (*Muslim Americans: Middle class and mostly mainstream*, 2007), Islam is not the second-largest religion, but is practiced by a mere .6 % of the U.S. population, falling behind all branches of Christianity and Judaism. One reason for the discrepancy in population figures could be that many Muslims in the U.S. are immigrants who may not be U.S. citizens. Another cause is that the census does not count religious affiliations, or has not since the 1950s. There is not as much discrepancy in population counts with other religious populations (Christian, Judaism) as with followers of Islam, or Muslims.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2007) reported that 29 percent of Muslims living in the U.S. are between the ages of 18 and 29, an age range in which many individuals attend college. According to Rasheed Ali and Bagheri (2009), approximately 75,000 Muslims are currently enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (p. 48). Muslim college students face many challenges related to their religious beliefs, such as lack of accommodation for prayer space or meals during Ramadan. Christian holidays are usually recognized as university holidays (e.g., Christmas). Many secular universities also have a chapel that may cater to Christian students more than students of other faiths, given the placement of the pews, the presence of an altar, or other traditional Christian symbols. The presence of Christian privilege at an institutional level is problematic and oppressive for

those who do not adhere to Christianity. Blumenfeld (2006) offered this analogy to explain Christian privilege, based on Peggy McIntosh's (as cited in Blumenfeld, 2006) work on white and male privilege:

[We can understand Christian privilege] as constituting a seemingly invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits accorded to Christians, with which they often unconsciously walk through life as if effortlessly carrying a knapsack tossed over their shoulders. This system of benefits confers dominance on Christians while subordinating members of other faith communities as well as non-believers. (p. 195)

Other areas where Christian privilege is prevalent and tolerance for Muslims and other faith groups is absent could include: the lack of meal options offered by institutional dining services, especially given that many Muslims do not eat pork, and university breaks or class recess time that is scheduled around Christian holidays while no time off is given for Islamic holidays (Rasheed Ali & Bagheri, 2009).

Given the marginalization that Muslim students may face and the prevalence of Christian privilege on campus, it is likely that the identity development work Muslim students go through is not the same as that of students in the dominant and majority groups. Muslim women may encounter contradictory expectations in the university setting as opposed to within their community of faith, leaving them to make choices and decisions that students from the dominant group are never asked or forced to make. A few examples of these decisions are: whether or not to leave class if time of prayer falls during a class, whether or not to marry at a young age if pressure from family or community is suggesting that they do so, and whether or not to wear a hijab.



There is a plethora of literature, theories, and models available on the identity development of college students (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), but very little of this research and literature focuses on Muslim women. Theories on the identity development of Muslim students will not be found in racial and ethnic identity theories because Islam is a religion, not a race, ethnicity, or nationality. Muslim immigrants in the U.S. are heterogeneous racially and ethnically and have emigrated from various countries, including: Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Egypt (Forgrave, 2010). Spirituality and faith identity development is, however, one aspect of social identity development (Evans, et al., 2010). Nasir and Al-Amin (2006) wrote about the importance of sensitivity to others' faiths on college campuses:

Religion not only defines us in terms of our participation in practices and membership in certain communities within the context of our societies, but it also defines us in relation to God and the universe. Sensitivity to this important aspect of the identities of people from all faith traditions will make college campuses less alienating places for them. (p. 23)

Sensitivity toward Muslim students' religious and faith development is necessary and not currently being given the attention it deserves. While all Muslim students may face more difficult identity work during their college-going experience than Christian students, I believe that Muslim women may face even more challenges than Muslim men; a situation of which student affairs' professionals may not be aware or understand. Through this study, my intent was to begin to fill what is currently a large gap in the literature related to the development of Muslim women.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to better understand how a sample of Muslim women at a large, Midwestern, research university construct their identities and make decisions about personal religious expression, and how the campus climate influences and interacts with the construction of their social identities.

It was important to undertake this study because there is a need for a deeper understanding of the experiences and social identity construction of non-dominant religious populations in college. Crotty (1998) wrote: “Not too many of us embark on a piece of social research with epistemology as our starting point.... We typically start with a real-life issue that needs to be addressed, a problem that needs to be answered. We plan our research in terms of that issue or problem or question” (p. 13). The real life issue at hand that led to this research study is the lack of literature and knowledge of the experiences of Muslim women at large, Midwestern, research institutions in the U.S.

Much of the social identity development literature related to faith or religious development that currently exists is grounded in a dominant religious population of Christian, mostly protestant, students (Evans, et al., 2010). Although at least 75,000 Muslims are currently enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (Rasheed Ali & Bagheri, 2009), there is still a gap in the literature on the experience of Muslim students in American higher education, especially the experience of Muslim women.

The U.S. census does not count religious populations, and therefore it is unknown exactly how many Muslims are residing in the U.S. While the Pew Research Center (2007) estimated the total Muslim population in the U.S. to be 1.4 million in 2007, the American Muslim Council released an estimation of three million in 2001 (Ba-Yunus & Kone, 2006).

A similar discrepancy exists with regard to the numbers of Muslim students in higher education. While Rasheed Ali (2009) reported that 75,000 Muslims were enrolled in higher education, the Pew report (2007) found that 22% of the Muslim population in the U.S. was currently enrolled in colleges or universities. Since Pew's estimate of the Muslim population was 1.4 million, 22% of that number would equal 308,000 Muslim students enrolled in colleges or universities. The New York Times World Almanac (2000) reported that estimates of the U.S. Muslim population are "educated approximations, at best" (as cited in *Muslim Americans: Middle class and mostly mainstream*, 2007).

Unfortunately, while the Muslim student population is increasing, many of these students face marginalization, racism, and a misunderstanding of their faith (Rasheed Ali & Bagheri, 2009). Muslim students face marginalization related to their faith, and many also face racism, as 62% of Muslims in the U.S. are non-white (*Muslim Americans: Middle class and mostly mainstream*, 2007). The misunderstanding of Islam as a religion among students, staff, and faculty has been further distorted following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Towers, partly because of media coverage. Islamophobia, or "fear of all things Islam" (Afridi & Carnegie Corp. of New York, 2001), will be further reviewed in Chapter 2. Given the increase in the Muslim population in the U.S. and some of the challenges Muslims face related to religion and ethnicity, the lack of literature on the identity development of Muslim women in higher education is an important gap to fill in student affairs literature that strives to help professionals understand the populations they serve.

## **Research Questions**

In order to better understand how Muslim women at a large, Midwestern, research university construct their identities and how the campus climate influences and interacts with the construction of their social identities, I will investigate the following questions:

1. How do Muslim women enrolled in a large research institution in the Midwest United States understand and explain the development of their identity?
2. How does the context of the campus environment play a role in the identity development of Muslim women attending a large research university in the Midwest United States?
3. How do Muslim women at a large research university make decisions about the extent to which they participate in Islamic religious rituals such as wearing a headscarf and adhering to the five pillars of Islam?

### **Rationale**

Many college campuses claim to value diversity and multiculturalism, but investigating whether or not true multiculturalism or pluralism exists may produce an answer that differs from the message administrators may be sending. Most studies on religion and faith within higher education have focused on Christianity, and generally Christian students are provided with more opportunities and spaces, both physical and emotional, than students who are not Christian (Mir, 2006). How present are spaces and opportunities for Muslim women on campus? Mays (as cited in Mir, 2007) discussed the environment on college campuses and how it may affect students' identity development. Mays used the term 'identity work' rather than identity development. While she was referring to development, she discussed the struggle and turmoil that may accompany identity development, and therefore

likely felt that ‘work’ was a more appropriate term. Mays (as cited in Mir, 2007) articulated her point by discussing the climate in which students do their identity work:

Based on my research data, I argue that college campuses are cultures that do not facilitate ‘healthy’ identity work for many minority students. In these cultures, dominant constructions are imposed upon marginal groups and individuals, obliging them to engage with these constructions during their identity work, to comply and/or resist them. (p. 88)

Does Mays’s claim hold true for the campus on which this study was conducted? If it does, what are the implications of a lack of space for the identity development of minority populations, specifically Muslim women?

Mays (as cited in Mir, 2007) discussed the culture on college campuses and wrote that in a college environment, “dominant constructions are imposed upon marginal groups and individuals” (p. 88). When food preferences, class recess time, spiritual space, holidays, or other dominant cultural norms are imposed on individuals or groups who are members of a minority on campus, those individuals are forced to assimilate and adhere to the dominant norms or are challenged more than the dominant students to find a place where they feel they belong. When minority students are not supported, they are forced to make decisions that other students do not have to make, such as whether to continue cultural practices in an environment where those practices are not supported (e.g., praying five times a day, which is one of the Five Pillars of Islam). This challenge can be damaging to students’ sense of belonging on campus and to their identity development, academic progress, and overall well-being. Through this study, I hope to provide insight to student affairs professionals on the experience of Muslim women on campus so that they may better serve this population.

I hope that this study will aid in combating Islamaphobia, which is overly present in American society, mainstream media, and college campuses alike. Smith (2010) has written several books and other publications on Islam and has described Islamaphobia as a misguided and uninformed emotion that many Americans have about Muslims, citing poll results in which large numbers of Americans reported feeling “uncomfortable with the presence of Muslims in America” (p. 188). Islamaphobia may manifest in multiple fashions, one of which may be attitudes toward and perceptions of Muslim students on campus. The current political climate in the United States toward Muslims is hostile and unjust, and experiencing this environment is one of the many reasons that I was drawn to this topic.

Support also seems to be lacking for Muslim students on college and university campuses. For instance, there is a lack of university clubs and organizations for Muslim students on the campus at which this study was conducted. When searching the database for all clubs and organizations and using the terms Islam or Muslim (separate searches) only one club was displayed, the Muslim Student Association, which has 88 members. No results were found when the search term “Islam” was used. However, when the search term “Christian” was used, there was a plethora of search results (15 organizations). Part of this discrepancy in representation is likely due to the difference in numbers of Christian and Muslim students, and yet the utter lack of presence of Muslim groups may speak to the climate on campus toward Muslim students.

Faith and religious development are important aspects of students’ overall development during college, especially when viewing the student from a holistic standpoint (Branskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005; Parks, 2000, as cited in Maryl & Oeur, 2009). Research has shown that students who are involved in

religious activities are more likely to be healthier students; exhibiting academic excellence, less dangerous drinking patterns than their non-religious peers, and overall better health (Temkin & Evans, 1998). We know that it is healthy for students to be involved in religious activities, and therefore, as student affairs professionals, we must do our part to make the environment safe and open to all students who wish to partake in religious activities. Creating and maintaining a safe space is also important if students are to engage in cross-cultural interaction where students from different backgrounds can openly express their beliefs.

There is a lack of research and literature on Muslims in higher education, and certainly a lack when it comes to Muslim American women undergraduate students. Many of the studies on religion in higher education focus on Christianity or Judaism (Mays, 2003, as cited in Mir, 2007). Studies examining religious pluralism on college campuses have focused on Christian pluralism, meaning various denominations within Christianity, but not much emphasis has been given to pluralism outside of Christianity (Cherry, Deberg, & Porterfield, 2001; Higher Education Research Institute, 2004). In the Oxford American dictionary, pluralism is defined as two or more groups coexisting and a system that acknowledges more than one ultimate truth. Pluralism is an important step toward creating an environment where students can engage in cross-cultural discussions. The Higher Education Research Institute (2004) reported that nine percent of college students identified with a religion other than Christianity; while the Harvard University Institute of Politics (2008) reported that 18 percent identified with a non-Christian religion (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009). These low numbers reported by HUIP and HERI may have contributed to the lack of attention to the perspectives of religious minority students, especially Muslim students. In

fact, in Cherry et al.'s (2001) book, *Religion on Campus*, only one Muslim speaker is mentioned, and very few Muslim student voices are presented (Mir, 2006). My hope is that my research will continue to build on the very limited amount of work that has been done focusing on the experience of American Muslim women in higher education.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

There are no identity development theories specifically for Muslim students. As stated previously in this chapter, Muslim students come from various countries and vary in race and ethnicity, and therefore the racial and ethnic identity literature does not pertain to this group in its entirety. The theoretical framework for this study is based on multiple sources to provide room for the participants' stories to emerge without isolating them within a specific model. First, I used Abes, Jones, and McEwen's model of multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000), which focuses on the intersections of social identities and the role of cognitive development in how individuals come to see themselves. In addition I drew on the notion of third spaces and hybrid identities, developed by Shabana Mir (2006), who built on the earlier work of Homi Bhabha (1990). I also considered concepts associated with Fowler's (1981) faith identity development model, while remaining cognizant of the potential non-applicability of his theory to the participants in this study, for reasons outlined further in Chapter 2.

The biggest hurdle I faced in my literature review and search to find a theoretical framework was the distinct divide between faith-based theories and models and identity construction models, as well as the total lack of attention to Muslim students in any of these models. For example, Jones and McEwen's (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity is widely used and well known. This model is not specific to minority populations, and



places no emphasis on faith or spiritual social identities. Fowler's (1981) model of faith identity development is also a prominent model within faith identity development, but using that model as my sole framework would seem to indicate that faith is central in the lives of my participants. While faith identity may emerge as being salient for them, to make that assumption as a researcher, prior to spending time and constructing knowledge with them, would be wrong and would contradict my epistemological stance of constructionism, which views co-construction of knowledge as central to the project. Using all three models, Jones and McEwen's (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity, Shabana Mir's (2006, 2007) work on third spaces and hybrid identities, and Fowler's (1981) faith identity development model, allowed for participants' stories to emerge the way they wanted to them to be heard. Given the limitations within the models, which are discussed further in Chapter 2, using a combination of all three will allow for flexibility and adaptability depending on the participant. In Chapter 2, I provide relevant literature for this topic, Chapter 3 reviews the methodology, Chapter 4 reviews findings, and Chapter 5 includes discussion in light of literature and theories.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of background information on several topics as they relate to the identity development and experiences of Muslim undergraduate college students. First, I provide a brief overview of Islam and the Five Pillars in order to establish an understanding of Islam and its tenets. Next, I provide an overview on Muslim women in relation to gender roles, and Muslim women in higher education. I then discuss the three main theories that I used as my theoretical framework: Jones and McEwen's (2000) multiple dimensions of identity and Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualization of the model, Mir's (2006) work on *third spaces* within identity development, and Fowler's (1981) theory of faith identity development. In Chapter 5, in the thematic analysis, I used Abes et al.'s model in my interpretation of the findings. Although not referred to directly in my interpretation, Mir and Fowler's work informed how I thought about and understood the experiences of participants. Finally, I provide some background and indicators for climate on college campuses as they relate to religious minorities, particularly Muslim students. This material provided a foundation for my consideration of the campus climate of the university at which I conducted my study.

There is little data available on Muslim students, and even less available on Muslim American women in higher education in the U.S. (Shammas, 2009). The participants in this study are Muslim American women who practice Islam and who have expressed the importance of faith and Islam in their lives. There are only a few scholars (Hermansen, 2004; Mir, 2006; Peek, 2005) who have focused on the identity construction of Muslim

Americans, and even fewer who have done so within a space that is dominated by a population of majority white individuals, such as most U.S. college campuses (Asmar, 2005; Khan, 2002).

In my search for and review of the literature focusing on Muslim American women in higher education, there were two authors whose dissertations focused on questions similar to the questions I was attempting to answer. Shabana Mir (2006) is one of those individuals. Her ethnographic study focused on identity construction of ethnically diverse American Muslim undergraduate women at two private universities in the eastern United States. Mir's work focused on second-generation diasporic Muslim women. The other individual is Jasmin Zine (2000), whose work focused on Muslim youth in Canadian K-12 and higher education. Zine's work was cited in the literature reviews of several theses and dissertations that I read while completing my own literature review.

The biggest hurdle I faced in my literature review and search to find a theoretical framework was the distinct divide between faith-based theories and models and identity construction models. For example, Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity is widely used and well known. This model is not specific to minority populations, and places no emphasis on faith or spiritual social identities. Fowler's (1981) model of faith identity development is also a prominent model within faith identity development, but I hesitated to use that model as my sole framework because I did not want to make the assumption that faith would be very central in the lives of my participants. While faith identity did emerge as being salient for them, to make that assumption as researcher, prior to spending time and constructing knowledge with them, I felt would contradict my epistemological stance of constructionism, which views co-

construction of knowledge as central to the project. Therefore, I provided a brief overview of Fowler's theory in Chapter 2, and it informed some of my own understanding of faith identity development as I collected data and engaged in the co-construction of knowledge with my participants.

### **Islam: Practices and the Five Pillars**

In this section of the literature review, I discuss the Five Pillars of Islam (Ba-Yunus & Kone, 2006; Rasheed Ali, Ming Liu, & Humedian, 2004). For my purposes in this study, understanding at least the basics of Islam was vital to my data collection and co-construction of knowledge with my participants, which is a cornerstone of my epistemological stance. An understanding of the Five Pillars and other Islamic tenets was necessary to understand participants' viewpoints, experiences, and stories they share, as the interview questions related to Islam and religious practices. Not identifying as a Muslim, it was especially important for me to show respect for my participants by being informed of their faith. There are several books and articles that explain the Five Pillars of Islam, (Ba-Yunus & Kone, 2006; Rasheed Ali, et al., 2004; Smith, 2010), so for the purposes of this literature review I provide a brief overview, drawing from these sources. I include the Arabic words in italics throughout this section.

The "profession of faith" that there is one God and Muhammed was his last messenger is the first pillar of Islam. *Shahadah* is Arabic for "profession of faith," and literally, *the shanaada* means "there is only one God and Muhammed is his messenger" (Rasheed Ali, et al., 2004). Profession of faith entails confessing that there is one God, *Allah* (in Arabic), and that Muhammad was his messenger.

The second pillar is prayer, or *salat*. The Qur'an instructs followers that prayer should take place five times a day, and the time changes with the changing seasons and days. One of the participants in my pilot study, which I discuss more in Chapter 3, uses an application on her iPhone so she knows the exact time of day she should pray, as it changes throughout the year. The five times are as follows: before sunrise, or *fair*; early afternoon, or *zohr*; late afternoon, or *asr*; after sunset, or *majhrib*; and night time, or *isha*. It is important to not be interrupted during prayer (Ba-Yunus & Kone, 2006). A call to prayer, or *adhan*, is an everyday occurrence in other parts of the world, but not in the U.S. Of all the pillars of Islam for those who practice, prayer influences daily life more than the other pillars because it requires a pause from other activities five times a day and is more than just a pause. It requires, according to Smith (2010), "a total bodily response, both sitting and putting oneself through a series of physical prostrations" (p. 1). Throughout the literature, the second pillar, prayer, is noted as being very important for Muslims; I found prayer to be important to the participants in this study as well.

There are also some presumptions about the division of men and women during prayer, such as women standing behind men, if they pray together at all. The original purpose of this practice is not known, but later the thought was that it would help the men avoid distracting sexual thoughts. For this reason, Muslims built separate mosques for women, called *nusis*.

The third pillar is paying alms, *zakat*. At least 2.5% of one's income or 2.5% of the total of one's possessions must be given to a charity. The Qur'an specifies who is eligible to receive the *zakat*: individuals in poverty, or *fugra*; those who are in need monetarily, or *masakeen* in Arabic; and orphans, *yatama* (Ba-Yunus & Kone, 2006). Because the

government does not manage mosques in the U.S. as governments do in other Islamic nations, the *zakat* may be used to build and maintain mosques in the U.S.

Pillar four is fasting for 12 hours at a time during Ramadan, or *siyam*. Muslims are to refrain from eating, drinking, and sexual activity from sunrise to dusk during the month. Ramadan is also seen as a time when Muslims should be very aware of their actions and on their best behavior. Most sources that discuss the Five Pillars mention that during the month there should especially be no cheating or lying. Obviously cheating and lying are not condoned during other parts of the year either, but Ramadan is to be a time when Muslims are introspective and aware of others around them.

The fifth pillar is the pilgrimage to Mecca, or *Hajj*. This requirement is intended to happen once in a Muslim's life, although many Muslims may return more than once (Smith, 2010). The participants in my pilot study were careful to inform me that one is only required to make this pilgrimage if one has the necessary money and is physically healthy. Mecca is historically significant because of a story from the Qur'an. According to Ba-Yunus and Kone (2006), the pilgrimage to Mecca is "aimed at recreating a feeling of unity and brotherhood in the heterogeneous mass of humanity" (p. 17). The pilgrimage to Mecca is a uniting experience for Muslims of multiple nationalities and ethnicities. Mecca, the holy city, is located in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia benefits tremendously from the fifth pillar of Islam and continues to earn its main source of income from travel and tourism as a result of Muslims traveling to Mecca (Ba-Yunus & Kone, 2006; NPR, 2010).

Common beliefs for Muslims are the belief in a day of judgment and in an ongoing line of prophets culminating in the last prophet, Muhammad. The Qur'an unites them and is believed to be literal, handed down through the angel Gabriel. At the same time, the range of

beliefs is wide. Clarke (2010) pointed out that “among the most intensely debated of these issues is, without doubt, that of the position of women” (p. 196). According to Clarke, there are two main beliefs about gender in Islam. One, which she called “conservative,” is to preserve and restore the idea of women as holding a position of “respect and protection within an ideal system of gender relations” (p. 197). The other main belief, which Clarke called “liberal,” is a belief that while the Prophet and Qur’an attempted to secure a position for women, “spirit was neglected and obscured by later generations” (p. 197) and therefore the Qur’an should be reinterpreted and the original ideal of women should be brought back to life. According to Clarke (2010), liberal Muslims are likely to focus on the initiative and prestige of independent women in history. Conservative Muslims, on the other hand, focus more on womanly virtue and domesticity.

The following is an example of a story of one “liberal thinker,” Ali Shariati:

One liberal thinker who has attempted to go beyond dwelling on ‘womanly’ virtues is Ali Shariati, one of the forerunners of the Iranian Islamic revolution. Shariati’s famous tract *Fatimah is Fatimah* (1981) creates a Fatimah who does not allow herself to be defined solely as a daughter or wife, but rather is engaged in a constant struggle to realize herself as a person: “Fatimah must become Fatimah on her own. If she does not become Fatimah, she is lost.” This Fatimah, Shariati thought, would be the model for the modern Muslim woman who “wants to be herself, wants to build herself, wants to be reborn.” (Clarke, 2010, p. #)

According to Clarke (2010), “It seems that thought concerning political participation, like gender thought in Islam in general along with the social realities that inform it, is in a state of flux” (p. 205). Women are not to fast during Ramadan if they are menstruating,

although they are expected to make up those days later on. Intercourse is forbidden during menstruation, according to the Qur'an, although there is only one verse that warns about menstruation (p. 209). Clarke illustrated a few contradicting points about women's roles within Islam. I expected gender roles to be one topic of discussion, and while they were for a few of the participants, they were not for all. Participants in this study also did not use the terms conservative or liberal.

Divorce by a woman's choosing has been continually challenged, with many Muslims stating "it [divorce] would destabilize the family, since women are supposedly more emotional than men and might therefore rush to divorce without thinking" (Clarke, 2010, p. 215). Women are only allowed to ask for divorce if they give up some or part of their dower, called a negotiated divorce, or *khul*. "The basic norm or structural characteristic of the traditional law of marriage and divorce is male hierarchy.... It is stated that men are 'set over' women and also that husbands have the right to discipline their wives in various ways" (Clarke, 2010, p. 212). I have provided a brief background on Clarke's (2010) work with women in Islam and divorce because, while divorce did not specifically arise as a topic during interviews, it was important to have background knowledge about this topic.

For male and female Muslims in the U.S., cultural norms and assumptions may be a bit different than in other parts of the world. Ba-Yunus and Kone (2006) wrote, "America is a place where you are free to go to the mosque. You are free not to go to the mosque. This is a society in which Muslim women observe modesty *hijab* out of their own free will" (p. 25). Ba-Yunus and Kone (2006) also wrote about the ability to exercise First Amendment rights in this country and to vote in and vote out elected officials. The notion that Ba-Yunus and Kone discussed regarding freedom of choice and first amendment rights was not entirely



consistent across the literature I read and reviewed. Some authors have articulated this point, while others have not even skimmed the surface on this topic, possibly suggesting it is not a priority or common viewpoint. Whether or not women choose or are forced to wear a headscarf seems to be a disputed fact or difference across the literature. About the *hijab*, which is sometimes referred to as a type of dress code, meaning modesty, and sometimes literally as a headscarf, there are differing viewpoints. Some authors (Ba-Yunus & Kone, 2006) have discussed *hijab* as a choice for women, at least in the U.S., while others have discussed the *hijab* as a requirement and made the assumption that all Muslim women will wear the headscarf or *burqua*. According to Smith (2010) and Rasheed-Ali, et al. (2004) the Qur'an does not specify exactly how the body is to be covered, but does order men and women to dress modestly. It is clear that when the topic arises of *hijab* and women's dress, Islamic authors and researchers and those who study Islam address and write about the topic quite differently, suggesting multiple interpretations and possible conflicting viewpoints. One of my research questions involved the *hijab*, so being well versed on existing viewpoints about the *hijab* proved important.

### **Muslim Women**

Another difficulty I faced in conducting my literature review on Islam and Muslim women was the lack of literature available about Muslim American women undergraduate students in the U.S. Much of the literature was based on women living in countries other than the U.S., which may not apply to Muslim American women undergraduate students.

Ba-Yunus and Kone (2006) wrote about Muslims in the United States and the way the U.S. culture influences their lives. They wrote about the freedom to choose whether or not to attend a mosque, the ability to vote elected officials in and out of office, and the freedom of

women in choosing to wear the *hijab* or not. They wrote, “This [America] is a society in which Muslim women observe modesty (*hijab*) out of their own free will” (p. 25). The Muslim women with whom I co-constructed knowledge talked about (during the pilot study) the decision of whether or not to wear the *hijab*. Not all Muslim women may feel they have the ability or space to choose for themselves whether or not to wear the *hijab*. There is a misunderstanding among many people living in the U.S. regarding the language for the various types of head coverings. For example, many use the term veil or *burqa* when they really mean headscarf or *hijab*. *Hijab* is worn to cover the hair but still reveals the entire face. A *burqa* covers a woman’s entire face, eyes included. Most Muslim female college students who choose to cover their heads wear a *hijab*, not a *burqa* or veil. The misunderstanding in language is one example of a way in which U.S. citizens are largely unaware of the cultural traditions of Muslim women (Severson, 2010b). Khan (2002) wrote about reactions that the veil elicits: “In particular the veil elicits strong emotional reactions and appears to function as the ultimate symbol of Muslim women’s oppression, silencing any veiled women who may be present in the room” (p. xxiii). While Khan was talking about a full covering, which is the *burqa*, I would argue that in the context of a Midwestern research university, many have the same reaction when a woman is in the room with a headscarf, or *hijab*. None of the participants in this study wore the *hijab*, but two of the participants noted that they receive a reaction from others anyway, even without the *hijab*, and suggested that those who do wear a headscarf receive even more strange looks and stares. This feeling of being out-of-place and being stared at led one of the participants not to wear a headscarf, saying the trouble it would cause her is more trouble than God would want her to have at this point in her life.

### **Muslim Students in Higher Education**

Mays (2003, as cited in Mir, 2006) wrote about how little has been done in colleges and universities to meet the needs of Muslim students. While I mentioned this problem in the rationale section of the proposal, Mays also found that most studies on religion and faith focus on Christianity. A well-known book entitled *Religion on Campus* (Cherry, et al., 2001) consists of four case studies of colleges and universities across the U.S. In the authors' conclusion of the book, they stated, "Opportunities for undergraduates to practice religion were widely available at all four schools" (p. 275). The authors are only claiming opportunities and space for religious practice of dominant Christian students, not for Muslim students. They noted that the most common and prevalent organizations for students to be involved in were evangelical in nature.

According to Mir (2006), ethnic enclaves either benefit minority students or increase ethnocentrism. She found that often these enclaves result from dysfunctional pluralism on campus. It was not feasible in this research study to conduct a campus audit to survey and measure pluralism; however, awareness of and attention to the pluralism present (or not present) on campus was important to make informed observations. Information on pluralism was obtained by asking participants about their experiences related to pluralism on campus. Mir (2007) wrote about her view of pluralism:

The 'pluralism' of campus life is, in my view, a flawed pluralism, one in which students have the 'choice' to be marginalized by their own minority practices.

Qualitative research such as mine demonstrates how marginal perspectives are silenced in spaces of higher education as well as how dominant discourses are

‘inscribed’ upon people, thereby limiting them to the choice of complying, resisting, or both.

A precursor to pluralism is a safe and inclusive environment in which individuals may discuss various faiths. In this study, participants did not report a safe or inclusive environment. I will expand upon this topic in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 3 of this thesis I make a case for using a case study methodology, with a central focus being the importance of the context in a case study. Mayrl (2009) wrote about the tendency for researchers of higher education and religion to “decontextualiz[e] the students that they study . . . appear[ing] to assume that all colleges are the same and that their effects are uniform on students” (p. 271). In this study, I am contextualizing these students’ experiences because I acknowledge that the spaces and lack of spaces, developmental space or lack thereof, and campus climate absolutely influence experiences and development. The campus climate at a large Midwestern University may be quite different than the climate at a small, religiously affiliated college and I believe this context may influence students’ identity construction, and certainly their experiences. The context also proved different than it likely was prior to 9/11, another reasons context was important and relevant in this study.

### **Multiple Dimensions of Identity and the Reconceptualization of the Model**

The model of multiple dimensions of identity, and its reconceptualization, was used as one model in my theoretical framework and helped to situate my interview questions, while being cognizant of multiple identities of participants. I provide a brief overview of the earlier model (2000), as well as the most recent (2007), and discuss its applicability to my study.

Jones and McEwen's (2000) findings from their initial study on multiple dimensions of identity were published in the *Journal of College Student Development*, in an article entitled "A Conceptual Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity." The participants in their study were all women, ages 20-24, and diverse in race and ethnicity. Jones and McEwen (2000) also noted diversity in religious identification among participants, with the following faiths represented among their participants: Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Holiness Pentecostal. No Muslim students were involved, albeit their study consisted of a more religiously diverse population than those focusing on faith identity development theories. Jones and McEwen (2000) discussed the lack of identity development theories that explain and acknowledge multiple dimensions of identity and the need for such theories that clearly articulate making meaning of multiple identities.

Jones and McEwen (2000) used "purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), which emphasizes sampling for information-rich cases" (p. 407) and later in the study used snowball sampling. The interviews in their study were open-ended to allow for conversations and dialogue regarding the "internal and interpersonal processes by which they defined their identities and made sense of difference" (p. 407). Saturation was reached when the same themes started to emerge in the interviews.

In the findings of the study, Jones and McEwen (2000) wrote: "When interacting with certain sociocultural conditions such as sexism and racism, identity dimensions may be scrutinized in a new way that resulted in participants' reflection and greater understanding of a particular dimension" (p. 410). An example from my pilot study that supported Jones and McEwen's (2000) finding would be the Muslim students explaining the need to understand their religion very well and be able to defend it and explain it at any time. As students' social

identity is scrutinized, they may further reflect internally and come to more deeply understand that aspect of their identity as they are forced to comply with or resist dominant norms (Mir, 2007). The complying with and resisting dominant norms is also a central focus in the literature on third cultures, as individuals negotiate between more than one dominant culture.

Jones and McEwen (2000) suggested further research on the topic of multiple identities and the need to develop models that accurately illustrate the identity development process and understanding of that process. The authors also recommended further research to deeply understand the role context plays in identity construction. Some of these suggestions were considered and explored in follow-up research, including Abes and Jones's (2004) study that focused on lesbian college students and their sexual orientation identity, as well as Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualization of the model, in which they incorporated meaning-making capacity.

Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualizing of the model resulted in the addition of a "meaning making filter" which can most simply be explained as a filter or sieve through which outside influences may (or may not) seep through. Abes et al. (2007) found that if individuals were in latter stages of development, the filter was thicker (or the sieve was more tightly knit), resulting in fewer outside influences making it through to the self.

Research question two in this study was, "How does the context of the campus environment play a role in the identity development of Muslim women attending a large research university in the Midwest United States?" This question is incorporating context and self-perception, which are related. The question is how and in what ways do the multiple settings and identities interact? According to Omi and Winant (1994, as cited in Abes et al.,

2007), “The meanings of social identities cannot be fully captured as they change with evolving contexts and relationships” (p. 2). The participants in this study arguably have a context that changes more dramatically than the majority, dominant student on campus. These participants identify with a culture whose practices are vastly different from the dominant culture on campus, forcing them to negotiate between and among multiple cultures, simultaneously, or find their own balance.

While the model is well developed and I believe it will prove effective in making meaning of the participants’ experiences, it is worth noting that the research and data collected in 2004 for the study was based on 10 lesbian college students, none of whom identified as Muslim. Just as discrepancies in populations have been noted in other theories, it is worth considering here as well. All participants in my study shared that they identify as Muslim female college students. In Abes et al.’s study (2007), they looked closely at how participants’ meaning making filter functioned while making meaning of sexual orientation. So participants who were further along in their own development had thick filters, which allowed them to (essentially) disregard outside influences when perceiving themselves. In my study, I did not ask about sexuality or sexual orientation. Several of the questions were written to encourage participants to discuss how they make meaning of their identities, likely religious identities, and the role that meaning making and context play in that process. Just as Abes et al. studied how participants made meaning of their sexual orientation, part of what I was studying is how participants make meaning of their religious identity.

For the purposes of this study, the work of Jones and McEwen (2000) and Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) was used as a theoretical framework to understand the

intersections of multiple dimensions of identity, as I acknowledge that my participants have more than one identity, and the potential saliency of those intersections.

### **Third Spaces and Identity Development**

Muslim undergraduate female students are constantly pushed and pulled in multiple directions. Their multiple identities may at times be contradictory or at times in agreement, but always they are forced to negotiate their identity and make decisions about how to express their identities. In my pilot study, participants described the difficulty in making decisions about how to express their religious identity. The notion of third space is acknowledged by many scholars (Khan, 2002; Mir, 2007), as a place where the individual creates a space in which certain aspects of multiple dimensions of identity are acknowledged or rejected to create a space that is her own, a third space.

Scholars (Khan, 2002; Mir, 2006) who have used the notion of third space in their work have drawn from Homi Bhabha (1995), who characterized third spaces as being places of “contradiction, repetition, ambiguity, and disavowal of colonial authority” (as cited in Khan, 2002, p. 2). Creating a third space allows for rejection of dominant notions or assumptions that typically are embedded within the first and second spaces.

Khan (2002) is one researcher who has discussed third spaces. She conducted interviews with 14 Muslim women living in Toronto, Canada, who were born in various geographical areas. Khan (2002) identified herself in her writing as a feminist, and discussed the third space, specifically the discourses surrounding and imbedded within the third space: “By opening up supplementary discourses in what has been called the third space, women rescript notions of the original, the pure, and the stereotypical” (p. xx). Khan discussed in great detail the multiple contradictions within a Muslim woman’s identity and the multiple



ways in which she may decide to express her identity to navigate her surroundings in the “First World [*sic*],” by which Khan means the West, or North America. Mir (2006) talked about women having to “comply [with] or resist” dominant norms. Khan (2002) discussed the “multiple contradictions within a Muslim woman’s identity” (p. xx). Khan and Mir both discussed Muslim women either complying with or resisting the multiple contradictions they face, but the commonality I see between the findings is that because of the environment and context, it is not uncommon for Muslim women to have difficult identity work to do because they are likely having to make choices that many students in the dominant group do not have to make. My prediction, based on previous work, was that when Muslim women attend college on campuses that are predominantly Christian and they are forced to make decisions about religious expression and other decisions related to faith, they may often be much more aware of their own religion and themselves than other students are, possibly because of the need to defend one’s faith and beliefs (Severson, 2010b).

Mir (2007), in her dissertation, also discussed third spaces for American Muslim women as being places where various aspects of multiple dimensions of social identities are combined or dissected to create something new. Mir (2007) wrote, “American Muslim women constructed third spaces by combining various dominant majority norms and Muslim/ethnic norms” (p. 79). American Muslim women, especially in the context of a university, are bombarded with dominant norms that are often contradictory to their religious and cultural norms, which may cause their identity work to be a difficult process, more so than for individuals of the dominant population. This struggle is one ridden with the need or desire to be “normal” while at the same time maintain cultural or religious beliefs. Mir (2007) wrote: “American Muslim undergraduate women engage in identity construction

within cultural circumstances of inequality, but are constantly engaged in attempts to rewrite peer culture and fracture the power of the dominant majority youth culture” (p. 72). The dominant culture to which Mir referred encompasses the drinking and dating prevalence on most undergraduate campuses, which is vastly different from the practices most Muslim women perform and observe.

The notion of third spaces and hybrid identities was important for my study as I was constructing new understandings of how my participants make meaning of the multiple identities they hold and the various contexts among which they regularly and fluidly shift.

### **Faith Identity Development**

Earlier in this thesis I discussed the Fowler’s (1981) theory, which helped to inform my background knowledge prior to collecting data. In this section, I provide a brief overview of his theory.

Fowler was a Methodist minister who saw connections between what he was hearing when listening to peoples’ life stories and Erikson’s model of identity development (Dykstra & Parks, 1986; Evans, et al., 2010). Fowler’s theory is based on interviews with 359 individuals; 97.8 percent were white and 80 percent identified as either Protestant or Catholic. Fowler saw faith as being “both broader and more personal” than religion, but also noted that each person expresses his or her faith uniquely (Evans, et al., 2010). Fowler did point out that individuals at the same stage in his faith development model may hold very different beliefs, but their ways of thinking about and making sense of things (process) are similar (Evans et al., p. 197). One obvious limitation of Fowler’s theory is that his model is built largely on individuals who identify as Christian, which may limit its applicability to individuals of other faiths.

According to Broughton (1986), Fowler's work has been based on conformist, individualistic assumptions associated with Western culture. His work is also grounded in research by male psychologists. Fowler is, however, the leading scholar on faith identity development, and I considered the applicability of his theory when constructing my emergent themes in light of these limitations.

Fowler (1981) identified six main stages of faith identity development: (1) intuitive-projective faith, (2) mythic-literal faith, (3) synthetic-conventional faith, (4) individuative-reflective faith, (5) conjunctive faith, and (6) universalizing faith. For the purposes of this study, I was mostly concerned with stages three-five, as stages one and two are found in children and adolescents, and likely not applicable to college students. Stage three, synthetic-conventional faith, is characterized by a reliance on authority figures, such as parents, teachers, and church leaders. While individuals in stage three may see themselves as making commitments, it is likely that those commitments are derived from outside sources, not the inner self. Fowler (1981) described this process as the "authority [being] located externally to self" (p. 154). Individuals move out of stage three and into stage four, individuative-reflective faith, when reliance shifts from external forces to a "relocation of authority from within the self" (p. 177). To move into stage four, a disruption of previously held, external sources of authority must occur. For example, in my pilot study, one of my participants spent quite some time explaining to me how she was forced to re-examine and re-learn her religious beliefs when moving to the U.S. because she was constantly being challenged. Her views and commitments continued to become stronger and more internal as she examined her religion, beliefs, and herself (Severson, 2010a). Stage four is also characterized by a "critical awareness" and an ability to look at situations and events more

from a removed standpoint (Fowler, 1981). Fowler (1981) described stage five as a stage very few people ever reach: “Conjunctive faith suspects that things are organically related to each other; it attends to the pattern of interrelatedness in things, trying to avoid force-fitting to its own prior mind set” (p. 185). Stage five requires an ability to engage openly in dialogue, clearly see and articulate injustices, and an ability to reconcile the “conscious and unconscious” (p. 186), which I understand to partly require individuals being at peace with what they cannot explain. Fowler (1981) suggested that not many people reach stage six, universalizing faith, which is characterized by universalizing compassion that extends far outside of what we [as a general human population] would consider to be normal. Fowler cited Ghandi, Mother Theresa, and Martin Luther King, Jr., but only in the latter part of his life, as all having reached stage six. Fowler explained that a person in stage six loves life but holds it loosely, and that individuals in stage six are “ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith tradition” (p. 201). He characterized individuals in stage six as having a “radical commitment to justice and love and of selfless passion for a transformed world, a world made over not in their images but in accordance with an intentionality both divine and transcendent” (p. 201). While I did not use Fowler’s theory in my thematic analysis in Chapter 5, many of the participants did seem to be moving through or in to stages three- five of Fowler’s theory. It was helpful for me to have a background of this theory to understand more about the participants’ identity development.

### **Religious Involvement among College Students**

In this section I provide some background information related to college students and religious involvement. The benefit of religious involvement for college students has been made clear by multiple scholars (Higher Education Research Institute, 2004; Temkin &

Evans, 1998). The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) study surveyed more than 100,000 students attending 236 colleges and universities. A team of researchers conducted the study, with Alexander Astin and Helen Astin serving as co-principal investigators. The HERI (2004) study found that about 80% of students surveyed reported attending a religious service at some point during the past year, as well as discussing religion and spirituality with others. Religiously involved students exhibit higher standards of academic integrity, adjust to college better, exercise healthier drinking patterns, and are more likely to be involved in community service (Sutton & Huba, 1995; Low & Handal, 1995; Lo & Globetti, 1993; Frankel & Hewitt, 1994; and Gorman et al., 1994, as cited in Temkin & Evans, 1998, p. 65). The Higher Education Research Institute (2004) found that students who reported strong spiritual orientation were more likely to “find meaning during difficult times and feel at peace and centered” than those who did not strongly identify with spirituality (p. 14). Phillips and Henderson (2006) found that those who reported being at least somewhat religious experienced fewer symptoms of depression than those who self-reported not being religious. Further, Astin (1993, as cited in Mayrl, 2009) found that religious involvement was a negative predictor of “hedonistic” behaviors, such as drug use, drinking, and partying (p. 267). While many of the studies on religious involvement for college students centered on Christian students, the findings still held true for Muslim students. Whether or not they report being religiously involved may affect their experiences on campus.

### **Climate on Campus**

The context in which college students develop influences the construction of their identities. For students who identify as members of a minority population, the context and climate of a campus may have more to do with their identity development than it does for

those who are members of the dominant groups on campus, whether religiously, racially, or ethnically. In the findings from Jones and McEwen's (2000) study, they wrote: "When interacting with certain sociocultural conditions such as sexism and racism, identity dimensions may be scrutinized in a new way that resulted in participants' reflection and greater understanding of a particular dimension" (p. 410). If operating in an environment where certain identity dimensions are scrutinized, that environment may impact the identity development of students. For the population in this study, much of the campus climate may be related to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001; and other students', faculty's, and staffs' misunderstanding of those events, the Muslim population, and Islam as a religion. Does the campus community practice tolerance, a shared understanding, and acceptance? The answers to these questions, albeit hard to answer, may be especially telling regarding the campus climate toward students who are members of religious minority groups.

Some research has been done since 9/11 to study campus climate and attitudes toward Muslim students on campus (Bryant, 2006; Moskalenko, McCauley, & Rozin, 2006; Shamma, 2009). A common theme throughout these studies is an increase in backlash and racism targeted at Muslim students since September 11 (Bryant, 2006; Shamma, 2009). Bryant (2006) cited a *Brookings Review* article by Easterbrook, which found that Americans have, in general, showed an increasingly tolerant attitude toward people of various religions, but also looked to Eck, who addressed post-9/11 attitudes, which were increasingly negative toward those who were perceived to be enemies. Bryant wrote, "Tensions undoubtedly persist and have become visibly pronounced in this post-9/11 era" (p. 2). Bryant also discussed the importance of colleges and universities being supportive and welcoming to students of various faiths and stressed how far behind the research on religious minority

students is today. It was the goal of this study to fill some of the large gap on the experiences of Muslim women in American higher education.

One aspect of campus climate may be the pluralism, or lack thereof, that is or is not evident. To explain and discuss pluralism and how it might be measured or assessed on a campus, I looked at the Pluralism Project at Harvard University. Eck (2010) outlined four key points about pluralism: (a) Pluralism is explained as being an achievement, not an assumption; with the acknowledgement that “religious diversity is a given, but pluralism is not”; (b) Pluralism is the “active seeking of understanding across lines of difference.” Tolerance does not insist upon interfaith dialogue as pluralism does; (c) “Pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind, for pluralism is the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another”; and (d) “Pluralism is based on dialogue. . . dialogue does not mean everyone at the ‘table’ will agree with one another, [but the commitment] to being at the table.” I found Eck’s definitions and important points about pluralism to be helpful and cover a breadth of meanings within pluralism. To determine the extent to which pluralism is present on a campus, Cherry et al. (2001) noted the need to look at the “diversity of practice and choice” among students. To do so, I looked at organizations and spaces on campus. Examining the question, “What does pluralism really mean?” was important so that as participants discussed campus climate and the presence or absence of pluralism, I would have a better understanding of what that means, both to participants and in the literature. While it was my intention to delve deeper into participants’ understanding of pluralism and whether they felt pluralism existed at Midwest University, the participants did

not feel that they experienced even a safe and inclusive environment at times, so pluralism, unfortunately, was not a topic that arose.

### **Summary**

In this literature review, I have reviewed the religion of Islam and the Five Pillars, Muslim women and gender roles, Muslim students in higher education, and campus climate as a basis for understanding the population in this study and some of the multiple forces at work that influence their identity construction and experiences. I also provided a brief background of the theoretical frameworks I used in this study: Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) model of multiple dimensions of identity, Mir's (2006) work on third spaces, and Fowler's (1981) faith identity development model. While the current literature and research has added to the knowledge base surrounding Muslim women in higher education, this study will fill a gap that currently exists. At this point in time, to my knowledge, no one has published research about the experiences and identity work of Muslim American undergraduate women at a large research university in the Midwest.



### **CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methods that I used to answer the research questions that were introduced in Chapter 1, and to provide rationale for the methodological choices I have made about how to answer them. In this chapter, I discuss the qualitative nature of this study; the epistemological stance undergirding the study; the theoretical perspectives that guided my work; methods I used, including an overview of my pilot study, the setting in which the work took place, background on the participants, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and steps to ensure trustworthiness. I also address the significance of the study. I close with a discussion of reflexivity, along with limitations and delimitations of the study.

Again, the purpose of this study was to better understand how a sample of Muslim women at a large, Midwestern, research university construct their identities and how the campus climate influences and interacts with the construction of their social identities. I used a qualitative methodology for this study in order to understand how the participants construct their social identities and make meaning of their experiences. The questions I sought to answer and understand are questions that can best be answered through qualitative research, as qualitative research enables the researcher to search for the how and why involved in understanding experiences (Merriam, 2009).

#### **Epistemology**

Crotty (1998) defined an epistemology as “a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know” and as “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical

perspective and thereby in the methodology” (p. 3). The epistemological stance that underpins this study is constructionism, or the view that knowledge is reliant upon experiences and interactions, that there is not one truth, but that everyone experiences the world differently. Crotty (1998) defined constructionism as “the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). In my study, as participants interacted with the world around them, and with me, we shared an experience and co-constructed knowledge together.

In this research study, I co-constructed meaning with my participants, as they were involved in member-checking and participant validation. The constructed meanings at which I arrive are meanings at which no one else might arrive. The meaning cannot be discovered, for without my own investigation and knowledge generation, nothing would have been found, constructed, discovered, or created. According to Crotty (1998), “Meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (p. 42). In my viewpoint, and in the viewpoint of a constructionist, there is no single, objective truth that holds true for all. Just as people interpret the world differently, they hold different truths about the world around them.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Crotty (1998) defined theoretical perspective as the “philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria” (p. 3). According to Rossman and Rallis (2003), “traditional qualitative research holds interpretivist assumptions: knowledge is viewed as subjective; the researcher should

engage directly with participants to understand their worldviews” (p. 92). I engaged directly with participants, striving to understand their views and experiences.

Interpretivism as a theoretical perspective “attempt(s) to understand and explain human and social reality” (Crotty, 2009, pp. 66-67). In this study, acknowledging my assumptions and biases was especially important. Such acknowledgement is a key component of symbolic interactionism, which is a subset of the interpretivist theoretical perspective. Symbolic interactionism “grounds these assumptions in most explicit fashion. It deals directly with issues such as language, communication, interrelationships and community” (Crotty, 1998, pp. 7-8). As I studied multiple dimensions of identity and faith development; communication, community, and interrelationships were all essential to my interpretations and understandings of participants’ experiences. The interpretivist perspective “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 2009, p. 67). As I co-constructed knowledge with my participants, the cultural and historical contexts were considered and discussed, as I viewed them as playing a role in the experiences and meaning-making process.

### **Methodology**

Crotty defined methodology as the “strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes” (Crotty, 1998, p. 2). I engaged in a case study, which Rossman and Rallis (2003) described as “seek[ing] to understand the larger phenomenon through close examination of a specific case and therefore focus on the particular. Case studies are descriptive, holistic, heuristic, and inductive” (p. 104). According to Yin (2009), “Case studies are the preferred method when... the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within

a real-life context” (p. 2). I was not looking at identity development in isolation or as it exists alone, but at how the college environment influences identity development of Muslim women, which is a real-life context.

In student affairs, it is important to see the student in a well-rounded, holistic way (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005; Mayrl & Oeur, 2009; Parks, 2000). I thought it was important for me to be cognizant of the holistic individual in this study, and indeed, every participant’s story was unique. According to Yin (2009), a case study is a supportive method for this purpose: “The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p. 4). A case study was a particularly appropriate methodological choice because “the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). In this case, the identity development and religious expression of Muslim women was the phenomenon and the campus environment was the context.

One research question I sought to answer was, “What factors influence how Muslim women at a large research university make decisions about the extent to which they participate in Islamic religious rituals such as wearing a headscarf and adhering to the five pillars of Islam?” Interview questions that I asked in order to answer this research question included, “How did you make the decision not to (or to) wear a headscarf? When did you decide? How did the environment (or did it) play into your decision?” None of my participants actually wore a headscarf, but I was able to ask about how they made that decision. To answer these questions, a case study is a powerful tool to employ in the search for answers. This notion is supported by Schramm (1971, as cited in Yin, 2009), who wrote, “The essence of a case study ... is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions:

why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result” (p. 17). In seeking to discover *why* these women chose to wear a headscarf or not, a case study was an effective methodology to use.

My findings are not generalizable, as case studies are “context-dependent” and not generalizable to a larger population (Rossman & Ralis, 2003, p.105). Therefore, as this case study was conducted on the campus of a large, Midwestern, research university, the findings may be bound to large, Midwestern, research universities, and possibly just the campus where the case study was conducted. Even among my participants, no two stories were extremely similar. However, the experiences they shared still have value and are helpful in understanding the experiences of Muslim women.

### **Pilot Study**

In order to obtain a Masters of Science or a Masters of Education in higher education-student affairs at Midwest University, one course in the required sequence is Student Development II. When I took this course in the Spring of 2010, all students completed a semester-long identity project that involved at least three 30-minute interviews. Aspects of identity were divided among students lottery-style, and I got my first pick, “faith identity development.” For this specific identity, the population was the researcher’s choice. I briefly considered Christianity, and quickly decided I would not be challenging myself enough or at all in examining the Christian population at the level of depth we were permitted in this study. Then, I decided on Islam. I gathered materials on the Islam religion, read about contemporary Islam, and found the information for the Muslim Student Association at Midwest University. I emailed all executive officers (about 10), including a very brief explanation of my study. The email I sent out to all executive members explained that I was

conducting interviews as part of a project, how I found their names and email addresses, and that it would be an informal interview.

Approximately half of the students were available and willing to meet me. I interviewed three of those five students, the three being the students with whom I could arrange a time to meet within the parameters of the assignment. This pilot study captivated my interest in the topic, and interview times well exceeded the required 30 minutes. In doing a short literature review for this project, I discovered what I perceived to be a major gap in the research on Muslim students on higher education. This discovery led me to pursue a study on this topic for my thesis.

### **Setting**

The setting for this research study was a large, Midwestern, land grant, research institution. It is a predominantly white institution (PWI), with 87.4 percent of the undergraduate students identifying themselves as white in 2007; only 43.1 percent of the students are female (Iowa State University Office of Institutional Research, 2007-2008). None of my participants identified as white, and each discussed not finding a box they really wanted to “check” when they had to self-identify a race or ethnicity.

At predominantly white institutions, such as the setting of this study, misunderstanding of cultural groups other than the dominant white majority may be present, and two of my participants discussed experiencing racism at Midwest University. A stereotype is defined by Bhabba (1990) as a “fixed and static construction of other as the subject of colonial discourse” (p. 70; as cited in Khan, 2002, p. 3). It is my hope that the fruition of this thesis, and any work that may stem from it, will take a step toward breaking down some of the false assumptions and socially constructed roles that are currently held by

the dominant population regarding Muslim women. I also want to be clear that the findings that I arrived at are not generalizable to the experiences of all Muslim women.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were three female Muslim undergraduate students, and one female Muslim graduate student at a large, Midwestern, research institution, which I will call Midwest University. I used purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques (Maxwell, 2005) to identify my participants. Maxwell (2005) defined purposeful selection: “This is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten [*sic*] as well from other choices” (p. 88). In describing purposive sampling, Patton (as cited in Merriam & Associates, 2002) noted, “information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 12). The issues of central importance in this study were identity construction, experience at college, and religious expression. Therefore, women who were selected to participate in the study were those who were willing to share their stories and experiences. I also used snowball sampling more than I initially expected I would, as I had access to one participant who I interviewed during the pilot study and with whom I had begun to build a relationship. This woman, Diane, had previously told me that she would be willing to share names of other women who she thought would participate. By finding other participants through existing participants, I used a snowball sampling technique (Bertaux, 1981). Snowball and purposive sampling are similar sampling techniques in that it is likely with both that the participants will share the same phenomenon under study. It is important to note that the term *Muslim women* does not denote a specific nationality or ethnicity of women. I did not stipulate a particular country of origin for my

participants but I did delimit the study to those who had lived in the U.S. I had noted in my proposal that Muslim does not denote a specific nationality or ethnicity, and indeed my participants were very diverse in race and ethnicity. In some ways, this diversity affected their experiences more than I initially expected. For example, two of my participants, who identified as Arab and Pakistani, both discussed racism they experienced related to the currently political climate and assumptions about Islam. The two participants who identified as African-American did not report similar experiences. They do not outwardly express their faith in obvious ways, so it is possible that one would not know that they were Muslim.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

I explain my methods of data collection in this section. Crotty (1998) defined methods as “the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis” (p. 2). Through interviews and observation, I answered my research questions, which again were: How do Muslim women enrolled in a large research institution in the Midwest United States understand and explain the development of their identity? How does the context of the campus environment play a role in the identity development of Muslim women attending a large research university in the Midwest United States? How do Muslim women at a large research university make decisions about the extent to which they participate in Islamic religious rituals such as wearing a headscarf and adhering to the five pillars of Islam?

The main source of data collection in this study was the unstructured interviews with participants. I recorded, transcribed, and open-coded every interview. After the first two interviews and before the third, I coded the interviews in an attempt to discover what themes were emerging, and to summarize some of the participants’ experiences. I made lists of the



summaries and findings I had identified, and shared them with participants during the third interview, so that if participants disagreed or wanted to change anything, we could make appropriate changes.

## **Interviews**

As noted earlier, in the sections discussing research questions and purpose, I wanted to understand the way Muslim women construct their social identities and make meaning of the experiences in the context of a large, Midwestern, research university. I am humbled that the women in this study were willing to share their stories with me, and I eagerly listened to their stories and experiences. For my purpose of wanting to deeply understand participants' experiences, unstructured interviewing was much more appropriate than structured. Maxwell (2005) wrote: "Unstructured approaches, in contrast [to structured], allow you to focus on the particular phenomena being studied, which may differ from others and require individually tailored methods" (p. 22). While participants in this study had some commonalities (identifying as Muslim, female students), their experiences were very different from one another. Using an unstructured approach allowed for shifts in topics and discussion so that the interview could be tailored to the participant's experience. I interviewed to understand the participants' stories and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 1991).

Following Seidman's (1991) recommendations, I conducted three interviews with each participant. The first interview focused on relationship building, the second on certain experiences and topics, and the third went into more depth regarding the experiences that were discussed in the first and second interviews. Interview location was the choice of each participant, and most asked to meet in the library. I transcribed and coded each interview

before the next began to immerse myself in the process and be aware of themes as they emerged.

### **Observations**

I also engaged in observations of the participants. I attended the Interfaith Council meetings as a participant in the Interfaith Council. Only one of the four participants was a member of the Interfaith Council (Diane) so my observations were limited. Not only was Diane the only participant who was on the Interfaith Council, but she was the only Muslim representative on the council. Observing how she interacted in this group gave me a deeper understanding of her experiences and helped to build a strong relationship with her.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

All interviews were recorded with two devices, transcribed, and open-coded. Open coding involves reading the transcripts and field notes and making notes in the margin about main points that are important to the study (Merriam, 2009). All findings went through member checking, which was a time-consuming process, but important for my overall epistemological stance, which views meaning and knowledge as a shared, co-constructed experience. Merriam (2009) wrote that member checking, sharing results and initial analyses with participants, is the most reliable way to ensure accurate interpretation of the data. During the third interview, I shared initial findings and summaries with participants.

I took several steps to ensure confidentiality and informed consent. Participants completed informed consent forms, choose pseudonyms, the data remained on my computer with one backup (dropbox), and I was forthcoming with my participants about social media usage. For example, the two students who were participants in my pilot study have added me as a friend on facebook, and they are likely the only two people on my “friends list” who fit

the criteria of my population. So, if someone did want to find out who my participants were, it would not be difficult to do so. I think it is important that I let my participants know this information about facebook. We had this discussion during the first interview, but they showed very minimal concern and we remained “facebook friends.”

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four aspects of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Earlier in this chapter I discussed member checking and its central role in my study; this process is one aspect of credibility. I also engaged in triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources (interviews, observations). I intended to regularly engage in methodological, reflexive journaling, but time limitations during the data collection part of this study precluded me from doing so.

### **Significance of the Study**

The questions that were answered in this research study will contribute to an important, growing body of knowledge about a population that is increasing in American higher education. The population of Muslim women is a population that we, as student affairs professionals, must be more effective at serving in order to provide developmental spaces and foster pluralism, tolerance, and understanding on campus among students of the dominant population. My hope is that this research study will allow student affairs professionals to understand more about the experiences, social identity development, and faith development of Muslim women in higher education in order to serve them more effectively. Some of the findings in this study, which will be discussed in Chapter 4, will be very valuable, I believe, to student affairs professionals and university faculty and staff who work with Muslim women.

### **Reflexivity**

The research perspective, positionality, or reflexivity, is defined as “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the ‘human instrument’” (Y. S. Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As a researcher, it is important to openly address biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research in which I am engaged (Merriam, 2009). I am not Muslim, which makes me an outsider to the population in this study. I identify as a Christian, but not with a specific denomination. I do believe in the productivity of interfaith dialogue and pluralism at its basic understanding, and those are both important values to also acknowledge (Eck, 2010). The participants in this study did not ask me about my own religious beliefs. I fully acknowledge that, as an outgroup member, there are potential biases present in my study that might not be present if I did identify as Muslim. One consideration that I did not reflect upon prior to identifying my participants was the potential differences among Muslims from various locations. The experience of one participant who was from Senegal was vastly different from the Pakistani woman in my study. Both experiences were fascinating and valuable, but I believe my themes may have been stronger if all participants had been from the same geographical area. Through triangulation, member checking, and reflecting on my own position, I examined my biases throughout data collection and analysis.

### **Limitations**

As previously stated in Chapter 3, the findings from this research study cannot be generalized outside of the setting in which this research was conducted. This is not necessarily a limitation of case study methodology, but a larger limitation of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). A lack of ability to generalize does not mean the construction of knowledge is not credible or dependable; it is only an acknowledgement that Muslim women

not in this study may not share the same experiences as the participants in this study. Even within the study, in some cases, experiences were vastly different, validating the necessity to not generalize the findings. The setting of the research should be considered when others are reading the work, and I make that clear throughout this document.

One delimitation of this study is the location, as the research took place at one specific campus, Midwest University. In addition, I interviewed four participants through in-depth interviewing. I did not research Muslim college men, nor did I research non-traditionally aged Muslim students. Therefore this study is specific to traditionally aged Muslim women attending college. Because of time limits, all data were collected within a three-week span.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to better understand how a sample of Muslim women at a large, Midwestern, research university construct their identities, make decisions about personal religious expression, and how the campus climate influences and interacts with the construction of their social identities. Through this case study, I sought to answer the research questions in order to better understand how the campus environment influences their identity development and how student affairs professionals can better serve these students.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The purpose of Chapter 4 is to present and discuss the results of this study. I completed 12 interviews among four participants, each whom I interviewed three times. The interviews comprised more than 12 hours of audio that I transcribed and coded. After open coding the data from the interviews and reviewing the codes, three themes emerged as salient to the participants. I will explain and discuss these three themes, each of which contributes to answering a corresponding research question that was part of this study. The three themes that I address in Chapters 4 and 5 are: the role of prayer in participants' lives, the influence of family and community in religious identity, and the role of environment in the experiences and identity development of participants.

### Participants

To set the context for discussion of these themes, I begin with a brief description of each participant.

#### **Diane**

Diane is a spirit-filled, involved, engaged, and eager young female student. She is a junior in software engineering and involved in numerous clubs and organizations on campus. Diane is very aware of her surroundings and is politically active. She is incredibly knowledgeable about her religion and faith, and is active in faith-based organizations, including an interfaith council. (Diane used the term “religion” when speaking, rather than faith or spirituality, so I will use this term when writing about her experiences.)

Diane lived in Qatar until she was 12 years old, but identifies as an Egyptian, calling Egypt “home.” She hopes to someday return to Egypt. Though she lived in Qatar, she said this about her community,

Um, but we, we were an Egyptian community. My friends weren't Qataris, they were Egyptians, everything was Egyptian. It was a very, very like community.

Everyone was similar; you kind of didn't have to think of what you were doing. You, uh, the expectation was, "Hey, you don't have any challenges." It was kind of easy to be like everyone.

Diane's identity as an Egyptian was salient to her, thus it is important to include her own words. Of all the participants, Diane was the most willing and eager to graciously share her experiences and opinions with me, and spend a significant amount of time discussing her experiences as an undergraduate student, her decision not to wear a headscarf, her community, and her faith.

### **Amy**

Amy is a strong, driven, and amazing person. Amy's story is filled with struggle and an ability to overcome, and is humbling, though she is incredibly modest when describing her life thus far. Amy is from Senegal, where she lived until age 14. Amy is open and vocal about her belief in education, and will soon graduate with a degree in international business, with plans to someday attend graduate school, possibly in women's studies. During the first 20 minutes of our first interview, Amy said,

I just tell myself, you know, it is all God, because I came from a culture where woman, um, how do they say it, once you like get 15 or 16, once you have your period, they just believe that it's time for you to get married and you know, have kids, and education is out of the question or even try to do something for yourself so, I never thought about getting a degree.

Far away from having children, and almost finished with her undergraduate education, Amy is future-oriented and goal-driven, constantly challenging and pushing herself. Throughout her undergraduate career she has worked at least one job, and is currently working two, each at least 12 hours a week, as she is supporting three family members, none of them her own children. Amy is self-conscious about her English skills, and often mentioned that she needs to improve her English language skills. Amy is involved in African organizations and international business organizations on campus.

### **Isha**

Isha is a thoughtful and inquisitive graduate student in psychology. One of her research interests is prejudice against Arabs and Muslims. Isha was born in Saudi Arabia, but identifies as Pakistani, as her parents are both from Pakistan. Isha spent a large amount of her childhood (11 years) in Oman. Isha moved with her family to Ohio when she was 12. Isha completed her undergraduate degree in three years at Ohio State University, graduating with a major in psychology and a minor in Arabic. When we discussed Isha's transition to her current school from Ohio State, she said,

Yeah, the only difference is--the school climate is a little bit different. Ohio State is much larger and much more diverse and many, many more opportunities and experiences available there than Iowa State. So, a little bit I'm missing that, but other than that everything is pretty much the same.

Isha and I spent a significant amount of our interview time talking about campus climate and racist experiences that she has endured since her time in graduate school, where she also received little support from faculty. I will expand more on this point later, but these



experiences have begun to shape Isha's understanding and experience of the school and city in which she currently studies.

Isha met her husband during her undergraduate education and married shortly after graduating. She now commutes to campus from the location where she and her husband live, about 40 minutes from the Midwest University. Isha shared and discussed with me her experiences before marriage, from "dating" to engagement, and the wedding ceremony, which I will discuss in more detail later.

### **Arielle**

Arielle is a spiritual, kind, funny, and open person. She is a senior in construction engineering, and actively job-searching and applying to graduate schools. Arielle grew up in inner city Chicago, in a "tight-knit community of Nigerians," where her father was an Imam. When Arielle described her childhood, she said,

Oh, yeah, that's part of why I think I was so immersed in my faith and my community because my dad is the imam for our Nigerian Muslim community. So, every Saturday and Sunday--like during the week I went to school--and every Saturday and Sunday I was in the Mosque, either learning how to read the Quran or teaching Arabic to everybody. That was just my life until I came to college really.

Arielle is very involved in engineering-related clubs and organizations, but reports not being involved in any Muslim organizations. When I asked if she was involved in any faith-related organizations, she said,

Um, not really. I think, when I first came here we didn't really have one so I never thought about it. Um, it wasn't until my fourth year here when they really started it.

And, by that time, I just became so used to my African organization that it never really affected me much, like I wasn't missing anything.

Arielle discussed how her religion shapes the choices she makes, especially in job searching, in which she is actively engaged. Arielle reported also experiencing what she felt was unexpected behavior from other Muslims on campus when she first came to her current school, which I will also discuss.

### **Themes**

In this section of Chapter 4, I introduce and discuss each theme that emerged through the interview process. I begin with the first theme, the role of prayer in participants' lives, and the two subthemes, physical challenges in the environment and prayer as a means of faith and trust in God. I include quotes from the participants throughout my explanation of each theme. The second theme is the influence of family and community in religious identity and expression, and the third and final theme is the role of the environment in experiences and identity development of participants.

#### **Theme One: The Role of Prayer in Participants' Lives**

Each participant discussed the role of prayer in her life in some capacity. There are subthemes that emerged within the broad theme of prayer: (a) physical challenges in the environment and (b) prayer as a means of faith and trust in God. In theme two, the influence of family and community in religious expression, prayer is discussed again, but in a different context. Some participants discussed how the religious practice of prayer has changed throughout their lives, becoming more or less salient or more or less consistent.

**Physical challenges in the environment related to praying.** Midwest University has very little available space that is appropriate for prayer for the Muslim population. There

is a Christian-based chapel in the student union, which has recently undergone changes to make it a more religiously neutral space, yet it is still not a location that Diane feels comfortable praying in, for spatial and privacy reasons. The cross that was in the chapel was covered with a curtain, and some of the pews were removed to make more room for a prayer rug, if others wished to bring one. For Diane, the lack of prayer space presents a challenge every single day because prayer time occurs when Diane is on campus and cannot easily travel home. For Isha, who has an office as a graduate assistant, the lack of space is “not something she has to think about.” For Arielle, her time in the residence halls during her first semester presented a problem, as she had no private space to pray, and she thought her roommate felt uncomfortable when she prayed. She did not want her to feel uncomfortable, so she avoided praying in her residence hall room. For Amy, praying in the residence halls was also a problem, and led her to move out of the residence halls after only one semester. For all participants, there was some sort of environmental challenge that they had experienced at Midwest University.

Diane frequently discussed how much she wished there was a space on campus where she could pray. The saliency of prayer in her life made the lack of space even more challenging. Diane discussed attempting to pray in the women’s restroom and in a corner of the library. The restroom was a problem because of lack of cleanliness (cleanliness is an important concept of prayer space), and when she prayed in the library she said people stared at her because of the headscarf she wears when she prays, making her uncomfortable enough to not pray in the library.

For Amy, the lack of space to pray in her residence hall led to her moving out after only one semester. She described the challenges she faced there,

I think the only challenge I had was when I was in the dorms for a semester because it was hard to practice the way that I wanted. I didn't feel comfortable, and every time I'm praying I'm wondering, is it good? It also has to do with--yeah, there are so many, there were so many thoughts that I was having, like, am I praying the right way, am I saying the right things, and all those things. And I guess, as I am learning more, as I attended all these things that are going on and be around people, I would be more comfortable and know that I am doing the right thing, or if I'm not, I would have someone to ask.

In addition to a lack of space in her residence hall, Amy was exploring her faith and religion and did not have very many outlets to support her in that personal venture. It was when Amy studied abroad in the UK that her faith strengthened and she began to practice more regularly. She said, "Because, I mean, I'll just go to class, and then right after class I could just go to the mosque and pray. I don't have to wait until I get home to pray like here at [Midwestern University]." In addition to having a mosque on campus in the UK, Amy said there were weekly lectures that she attended that were sponsored by the Muslim Student Association, and featured Muslim scholars and other religious leaders.

Amy was not the only participant to struggle with the lack of space in her residence hall. Arielle also struggled some during her first semester. Arielle addressed the lack of space and occasional discomfort with a bit of humor. She carefully explained to me what it was like to make *wudu*, a preparatory act for prayer, in the residence halls,

Before you pray you have to make *wudu*, where you wash your hands and your face and everything, so I just go into the bathroom and make *wudu*. And if people see me

in there they're like [Arielle makes a face to portray obvious discomfort]. I just be like, I'm doing my own thing, you do your own thing.

Arielle explained that for her, it did get easier as time went on. She said her roommate got used to her praying, and eventually would even turn her music down because she understood that silence was important during prayer to Arielle.

Diane has been actively involved on campus and has repeatedly asked for a prayer room, first to the dean of the college in which she is enrolled, and then to the vice president of student affairs. According to Diane, she was dismissed and essentially ignored, leaving her feeling that her needs are not seen as important.

You don't see the university caring at all about that, that topic. When I say, "Oh, I want to talk to someone about getting a chapel," that's why I say it's going to be different for me because I've dealt with them, I've gone to the--I've talked to the Interfaith Council, that's kind of why it got created. I mean not because of me but because during that time I was like, "Okay, who do I talk to? I need to talk to someone, I just want a place to pray on campus." If I was trying to do that prayer thing, finding a prayer room, if it was in high school maybe it would have been easier but here it's a big institution, you need to do a lot, to go through a lot to like make it happen and they don't realize how important it is, and they're not as helpful as high school.

When Diane started to talk about her experiences with the administration at Midwest University and trying to secure a prayer space, she usually talked about several things at once, as she did in the above quote, and showed obvious discomfort. Diane also discussed

how she feels the lack of space may affect other Muslims' religious practices, such as praying,

Because some people, um, they come here and they kind of get, they have a hard time praying. If you're religious you end up praying, but it's a really easy thing to just not do. So you see a lot of people who just stop. Because it's so hard and you can't really keep it consistently, and when I get home I pray like, you know, three prayers, at the same time, but some people just get home and, "Oh, I'm not going to pray anymore." But if you had access to it on the campus you could have had that in the back of the mind... I'm not saying it's a good excuse, but, I mean if it was easier, maybe those people would have continued to pray.

Diane also discussed the conflicts she encounters with having to be somewhere and plan for where she will pray. For her, it sometimes conflicted with studying because she was unable to pray at the same location where she was studying.

Well, we have different prayers but the nearest one was supposed to be, well, around 5:00. It changes every day, but then the last one is at like 6 something. But see, that's the issue, like normally students they're like, "Oh, I'm going to go on campus and stay and study," but no, I'm here thinking about, "Well, I need to get home because I at least need to try and make that prayer up." And it's not like, when people say "oh, it's so hard." No, it's not hard. You know you're praying for a reason but you wish there was a better option.

Isha, on the other hand, as a graduate student with a private office, did not see the lack of prayer space as a challenge or obstacle for her. Isha, who identifies as being from the Middle East, experienced more challenges in the environment in the form of overt racism,

which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter. Isha did not report praying as much as the other participants, which could be part of the reason she did not identify challenges in terms of spaces to pray on campus. Isha said,

I don't go to the mosque unless, during Ramadan I try to go during the break-of-fast evening prayer. Usually, there's just no way I can go so I actually don't go to the mosque to pray at all other than that. I just try to do--whenever I can pray--just try to do it at home or if I find a secretive spot here on campus.

Isha also spoke frequently about her undergraduate institution, and had this to say regarding availability of prayer space on campus,

And certainly at Ohio State there were more rooms that were specified for this purpose. So for example there's a huge population of engineers who are Muslims, so what happened is in the engineering building they had a room for the prayer room.

And I don't think those kinds of things are here [at Midwest University], and so I'm sure it would affect the people who have to be on campus and have nowhere to go.

But luckily for me I have a little private space of my own, so I'm not concerned about that.

For Isha, even though she does not identify personal challenges related to prayer space, she is able to see how it would be an obstacle for others.

I have provided several supporting quotes from participants regarding the lack of space to pray at Midwest University. Three or the four participants expressed struggles related to the lack of space in which to practice their faith. Prayer was an important aspect in all four participants' lives, and the lack of space caused two to move out of residence halls early and caused one participant fairly constant stress because she is concerned about where

she can pray. When participants discussed prayer, they also usually talked about the campus environment and physical spaces. The third theme I will discuss is the role of environment in the experiences and identity development of participants, which overlaps some with the first theme, which I have just discussed. These two themes overlap heavily, as prayer is such an integral part of the participants' lives. Later in Chapter 4, when I discuss this theme, there will be more discussion of elements of the first theme interwoven.

**Prayer as a means of faith and trust in God.** Two of the participants discussed the act of praying as a way of staying connected to God or as a way of talking to her “creator”; another uses prayer to help cope with the many challenges and struggles she encounters. Other participants talked about praying as a way to stay committed to religious expectations or “rules” or to “stay on the right path.” For Diane, praying was a way to stay connected to God and to stay linked to her commitments to herself and God. Diane said she prays more now than ever,

I think the prayer, I think I'm doing more now because, why... I think because in high school, I wasn't about praying all the time. A lot of the younger people aren't really good at that. But then as I went through high school and progressed through college I think I realized that if I don't pray every day, I won't remember; I'll forget. You know, you'll just forget. You know, like, what's the difference between you and him? So it's kind of a reminder for, you know, even though it's like now it's kind of a challenge, I, it's like, now, it's 5:00 and I'm worried about making my prayer up and all this stuff, but at the same time when I do it I'm kind of proud of myself that I'm doing it because you wouldn't, you know it's hard and you're doing it, so good for you. But in high school I didn't really see the purpose.



Diane often talked about making sure that she was “following her religion” and adhering to appropriate laws and norms. For her, prayer was vital in this feat. Praying was a way she reminded herself of what set her apart from others. Diane, more than the other participants, was very steadfast in ensuring that she prayed all five times a day. Hence, she also discussed the lack of space on campus more than other participants. Diane used an application on her mobile device so that she prayed at the correct times each day and reported praying extra when she got home to “make up” any she missed while she was on campus.

Arielle talked about her personal relationship with God more than other participants. Arielle talked about feelings and emotions when she talked about prayer, which was something that other participants did not talk about as much. Arielle discussed what prayer means to her,

Well, when you pray, the words that you’re saying are basically, you’re just--you’re giving praise to God. You’re, um, asking him for help, asking him for guidance. Um, you’re recognizing that you’re just a small piece in a puzzle. So, it’s pretty powerful for me. Especially if you’re really into what you’re saying, it’s a moving experience because you’re recognizing that you’re just a small piece. You could sit there all day and complain about all your problems, and, “Oh God, I don’t have enough money, I don’t have a job, I don’t have this, I don’t have that,” and, you could put everything out there, but the reflection that you have on it is, there are people out there that don’t even have money to buy food. They don’t even have the will to go to school because they have to take care of their parents. And it’s just sort of a humbling experience. That’s if you’re doing prayer correctly. [laugh] To me, that’s why we have to pray five times a day, because it’s so easy to forget. You know I could sit here and just

say, “Yeah, you know I know that there are people that are poor in the world,” and go about my day. But if five times a day I’m standing up there and I’m recognizing that I’m just a small piece in a bigger puzzle, to me it’s humbling.

For Arielle, prayer was a way to stay connected with and talk with her creator.

Arielle frequently smiled when she talked about prayer, and about being excited that it was time to pray. She discussed her journey of prayer since her first year of college at Midwest University,

I didn’t pray as often as I used to, I used to pray five prayers and then something more, maybe like read my Quran or something like that back when I was in Chicago. But when I came here, it became more of like, a chore, to pray, like, “Oh, I have to go pray now” rather than, um, you know, like usually I’m excited to pray like, “Okay now it’s time to pray, I get to talk to my creator,” whatever. But, um, coming to college, it was like, “Oh man, I have to pray”.... But I mean you realize after a while that you have to have something to hold onto, especially when you see a lot of things that you’re not comfortable with, um, and you don’t want to get sort of lost, so to speak, in that... chaos. You have to find something to hold onto. So, that’s my prayer.

It’s clear in the above quote from Arielle that prayer kept her grounded and was used as a tool to remain calm even in the midst of “chaos.” For another participant, Amy, prayer was a coping mechanism for challenges she was experiencing in her life,

But I guess for me, I’m just like, I’m always, whenever something is going on, I just.... something that I do is just pray about it and hope that this is the right thing, and turn to God, cause, at the end of the day he’s the only one who is going to still be there, nobody else, so. I guess that’s it for me.

Amy has led a very challenging life and still is supporting three of her family members. Amy talked again and again about how much she has overcome, and also often cited God as the reason she has been able to come as far as she has. For her, prayer is a way to connect with God and rely on a constant source of support in her life, even when “nobody else” will be there.

While Arielle talked about prayer being a way for her to connect with her creator, she also discussed the affect prayer has on her daily life:

Every time I finish praying I know I’ve prayed my prayer well. Nothing bothers me anymore. Like I can be broke, no food in the fridge, and I can just sit there and smile. Cause, what you have is relative. It’s all about what you make it.

Arielle seemed to show genuine happiness when she discussed her prayers and what praying means to her. Many of the other experiences Arielle shared were also related to praying and the mosque, such as spending her weekends at the mosque. If using Fowler’s theory of faith identity development, Arielle would be in higher developmental stages than other participants because of how much she has incorporated prayer and her faith into her everyday life. It is truly a part of how she makes meaning of the world, which is further shown in what she has to say about environments and her future employer.

Isha discussed God controlling her destiny, and what she does during prayer:

So I do tend to think things happen for a reason, I do tend to think that God controls my destiny, and I pray and I ask him for things and I believe that they will be fulfilled, so in those terms I would say that’s where my beliefs in religion really are right now.

Isha discussed prayer and religion less than other participants but spent more time discussing her studies and research related to dismantling the prejudices that exist against Arabs and Muslims. She reported visiting the mosque very little, and praying when she could. Isha did discuss one way in which she and other Muslims incorporate God into their everyday lives,

Muslims are very much about incorporating God into their everyday life, so, we say things like “in sha’a Allah,” it will happen if God wills it to happen. So, I’ll say that, at random times when someone asks me, do you think this, or, are you going to get a job, and I’ll say, “in sha’a Allah.” And I really do mean that I don’t think I have control over that, it will happen if it’s meant to happen, and so, that’s probably the extent to how religion is part of my everyday life.

Isha discussed her faith in God related to personal, family, and career decisions. She also shared that frequently repeating “in sha’a Allah” was one thing that separated her from others or identified her as Muslim.

Theme one was the role of prayer in participants’ lives, and the two sub themes were physical challenges in the environment related to praying and prayer as a means of faith and trust in God. Throughout the explanation and discussion of this finding, the participants’ voices and stories have shone through to best tell their own story about how prayer fits in their life, and what prayer means to them. The next theme is the influence of family and community in religious identity and expression.

### **Theme Two: Influence of Family and Community in Religious Identity**

Family and community were topics that arose in every interview with every participant during my study. To my knowledge and based on what the students told me, the

role of family and community is extremely important in these participants' lives. From caring for family when they are unemployed, ill, or otherwise unable to care for themselves, to feeling bound to familial expectations, family was integrated into every participant's life in some way. When we began discussing identity development and religious expression, the conversation often returned to "the way I grew up"; i.e., family, and community. For example, when discussing the decision as to whether or not to wear a headscarf, several participants cited their mother, other female family members, and community members as not wearing one, so it was never really a "decision" they made, but just "wasn't expected." In the explanation and discussion of this theme, I include quotes from participants relating to their own explanation of their religious expression and identity development.

**Praying.** There were varying levels of commitment to praying among all four participants. Diane was very insistent upon praying five times a day and often spoke about visiting the mosque on a regular basis. Isha, on the other hand, has not visited the mosque very often since she has been in college, and did not as a child or young adult either. This was not a change of habit for her once she came to college, as her female family members usually did not pray in the mosque. She discussed the norm for women during the call to prayer in Pakistan,

For some reason in the middle east, and in Pakistan for example, when there's a call to prayer, you can go, and there are sections for women and you have no reason not to go, but I think because women are not forced to do so, it's just more comforting and easy and convenient to stay at home and do it.... Over there, if you don't want to go, you just pray at home and your mom's doing it and your sister's doing it, and it just kind of feels right.

Isha talked about the sense of community that is missing when she is not around family to pray. She said that here [Midwest University] the mosque is needed more for a “sense of community.” However, Isha still reported,

I don’t go to the mosque unless, during Ramadan I try to go during the *break-of-fast* evening prayer. Usually, there’s just no way I can go so I actually don’t go to the mosque to pray at all other than that.

Later on in the interview, Isha explained her ultimate decision-making process, which suggested a well-developed and strong sense of self. She said,

Um, I think that, I mean, I was assuming some of this is probably because of my family and I was brought up kind of seeing my mom and my parents kind of go through these things. But it’s instilled in me that you do these certain behaviors at certain times. Um, but, at the end of the day, now that I’m independent, it’s my choice. I would say it really depends on time, and context, and the situation. During Ramadan I’m a little bit more religious I think than I am outside of Ramadan, just because, again, it’s just this feel of energy of other people and wanting to engage in that, and the support. So I would think that I would be affected more by the social context. So if there were more people around me engaging in this behavior, probably that would motivate me more to do it. But on my own, I kind of do it when I have time and I don’t do it when I don’t have time, and, it’s just all over the place.

Isha was able to openly identify and explain that her decisions depend on context and situation, and that sometimes (like during Ramadan), she is more religious. The ability to openly explain and reflect on her personal decision-making process suggests an independent sense of self, which is a concept that I will expand on in Chapter 5.

As the reader will remember from the participant profiles at the beginning of this chapter, Arielle's father was an Imam, which she believed had a large influence on how she grew up and how she practices her religion now. Arielle said,

O yeah, that's part of why I think I was so immersed in my faith and my community because my dad is the imam for our Nigerian Muslim community so, every Saturday and Sunday, like during the week I went to school and every Saturday and Sunday I was in the mosque, either learning how to read the Quran or teaching Arabic to everybody. That was just my life until I came to college really.

Arielle also explained that everyone in her community knew her as "the Imam's daughter" and restaurant owners would often tell her she didn't have to pay for her meal. Being an Imam is a volunteer position, but still requires a significant time commitment. As Imam, Arielle's father led the two night prayers once he was finished with work at his full time job as a teacher. He also led naming ceremonies, special prayers, and other community events. Arielle said people often came to visit him as well, just for support and to talk. Arielle spoke fondly of her childhood, but noted that she "didn't really have any friends outside of the mosque because most of [her] life was spent in the mosque." Arielle spoke for a little bit about what high school was like for her, and I asked how her religious identity or expression changed once she reached college. She responded,

I mean back in high school I never really thought about it. You go to the mosque Saturday and Sunday and you don't really, it never really seemed like it was something different than what everyone else was doing cause I had been doing it since I was a child. But yeah, coming here it was like, you had to focus on like, okay, it's time to go pray, you got to go pray. It's harder when you don't have someone in

your ear telling you, hey, did you pray already? So yeah, praying was like, a hard thing for me to get into.

Arielle gracefully recounted her journey from childhood to college, detailing how her prayer habits changed and how she pushed herself to continue praying in college, even if it was an extra struggle. Arielle explained why she continued praying:

Yeah, I continued praying. I didn't pray as often as I used to, I used to pray five prayers and then something more, maybe like read my Quran or something like that back when I was in Chicago. But when I came here, it became more of like, a chore, to pray, like, "oh, I have to go pray now" rather than, um, you know, like usually I'm excited to pray, "like okay now it's time to pray, I get to talk to my creator, whatever" But, um, coming to college, it was like, "oh, man, I have to pray".... But I mean you realize after a while that you have to have something to hold onto, especially when you see a lot of things that you're not comfortable with, um, and you don't want to get sort of lost, so to speak, in that... chaos. You have to find something to hold onto. So, that's my prayer.

Arielle thought that part of the reason she stayed so close to her faith was because her father was an imam and she grew up in a strong religious community. When we talked about praying or her habits related to faith and her religion, she most always brought up her family and her Nigerian Muslim community. Isha and Arielle were the two participants who discussed their families the most in relation to their current religious practices. Amy and Diane both are more distanced from their families, and did not discuss them as much. In Amy's case, her religious practices actually differ from her family in a few ways, and Diane



did not mention her family when discussing her faith, but rather how *she* made up her mind about what and how to practice or observe her faith.

**Clothing, attire, and hijab.** Among the participants, there were very different experiences regarding clothing and the hijab. Most participants spent or spend a significant amount of time thinking about their decision as to whether or not to wear the hijab and the reasoning behind it. While none of the four participants wears the headscarf, they all told very different stories about how they came to that decision and, in some cases, about what the Quran says about the hijab.

Every participant spoke about modesty or dressing appropriately, and Isha specifically spoke about how that can be a challenge in the U.S. For her, it started in high school, when she wanted to participate in “normal” high school activities, like dances. Isha described her mother and her family as being understanding when she wanted to attend a dance or wear a strapless dress, both of which she said would traditionally be unacceptable. Isha does not wear a headscarf, and when asked about how she made the decision, she said,

No, I mean, no one in my family did and we didn't feel the need to. That was something, again, that we took all the personal choice on, I'm sure if I wanted to my family wouldn't oppose it. I didn't, and, I was completely fine with that decision. I didn't think it had to be done, so, I didn't, yeah. I think here it is probably a very personal decision. Maybe in some of the Muslim countries it is initiated because of, let's say, cultural or social reasons, but in the end I think it is entirely a personal decision. And here, for sure. Because, again, you don't have that political pressure; in fact, you have things to kind of go against it a little bit, because you're recognized so easily... I can just tell you that in my understanding of rules about it, and, in my

experience with people who have worn it, I didn't think it was necessary. If the idea is that it's supposed to keep you modest, and, basically protect you from, uh, engaging in the wrong acts, then I don't think a scarf is going to prevent me from that. Um, I think that's a very personal, inwards kind of a motivation. And so, I didn't think that external scarf would give anything more than my personal choices.

Isha saw the decision of wearing a headscarf as personal but also not something she heavily considered. We discussed the multiple meanings of hijab, as sometimes it is a term used to mean overall dress or modesty as a concept, and there are many variations of hijab. Isha explained that she sees it as a continuum, and reiterated her belief in it being a personal choice,

So, I think it's an entirely personal choice with how much is it that you want to cover up, and that you feel is necessary. And then again, on the other side, you know, as far as not covering up, that's another choice, so, there's people, or Muslims, who would feel comfortable exposing, like, let's say, wearing bikinis or swimsuits, or skirts or whatever, shorts, and that's fine, and... So there's a continuum pretty much from wearing nothing, to like wearing everything pretty much. And, I'm sure people are all over that continuum. So I think it's a very personal choice.

Isha went on to elaborate, "I certainly don't believe in covering up the head or your body, like with loose flowing cloth. I think if you're modest, then dress 'conservatively' and you're fulfilling that purpose." Isha also explained that she has worn a dress on multiple occasions, which she was okay with, but she said she would not feel comfortable wearing a swimsuit in front of others or shorts or a short skirt. Isha also explained that one of the events for which she wore a dress was a friend's wedding. She said that this friend had

participated in her wedding and worn fully traditional Indian attire, and she felt it “equally important for me to be part of their culture, and basically be a bridesmaid in all its rights!” Isha’s view of religious expression in attire and dress is composite and multi-dimensional, which suggests a thick and impermeable meaning-making filter in Abes et al.’s (2007) model, meaning others’ assumptions or expectations do not reach through to Isha’s core. I will expand upon this point in Chapter 5.

Arielle also does not don a headscarf or observe strict Muslim attire. She explained that it was not a decision she ever really made, as it was not expected of her.

Oh no (laugh), that’s another thing our community doesn’t do is, women never, well, I know like two women who wore hijab. I can’t remember why that was; I think they grew up in Africa, and they grew up in a small community where everyone wore hijabs, so then when they came here it seemed kind of odd for them to just take it off. Which is fine; I mean, that’s the way they grew up. But even for me, I never thought about wearing hijab outside of just praying or going to the mosque. It wasn’t until I came to Midwest University that I was like, “Oh, women are supposed to wear hijab?” Oh, I never.... I mean even like short sleeve shirts or short pants, like, my dad never cared. He was just like--just make sure that you dress appropriately. He never cared about it. It wasn’t until I came to Iowa State that I met women from the Middle East and such and they’re like, “No, no, no, you’re Muslim; you have to dress this way” and I was like... “That’s not the way I grew up.”

Arielle said she was never forced to dress a certain way, but just was told to dress appropriately. Arielle went on to explain that when she encountered other Muslims at Midwest University, especially women who wore a headscarf, she was “really offended”

because of the lack of friendliness that she felt was because she was not wearing a headscarf. She said that the more she talked with them she realized,

They grew up in environments where all of their parents and all of their aunties and their family members, everyone in the community wore hijab, and none of the girls hung out with guys. So in their eyes, because they grew up in that sort of society, seeing anything different from that was wrong. So I started to understand.... What you see as wrong is fine with me, and I don't see it that way.

Arielle's ability to peacefully disagree and maintain her own religious practices is an example of a strong sense of self and ability to make decisions. When Arielle talked about other important decisions in her life, like job searching, she framed her decisions in her faith and her family. Arielle's faith in God and closeness to her family were very consistent themes throughout all of her stories.

Diane's decision not to wear a headscarf was a complicated and challenging decision for her, and at times left her fraught with emotional turmoil. She described it as a "religious duty" and although she does not wear a headscarf, she carefully observes her own personal modesty.

As you can see I'm not wearing the hijab—which is—before I came here I really wanted to, and my friends were pushing me, pushing me into it, but once I came here, I knew that it would provide more challenges that I can, than I would prefer. That's why I would like to go back and live somewhere where it's okay so I don't feel bad doing my religious duty. But other than that I incorporate it with me. If you see me a lot, you'll notice that I don't wear short sleeves at all. Always pants or skirts, I don't

wear anything short. So it's still part of me, and it's still with the modesty and all that stuff. It's part of me, because I think that's the law I should go by.

Diane expanded on some of the challenges she felt would have accompanied the hijab, had she decided to wear it. She discussed others' views of her and the constant looks she felt she would receive on campus. Diane made it clear to me that a Muslim woman is, however, *supposed* to wear a headscarf—she was quite adamant about that.

Well, it's a personal choice but you are supposed to. I want to make that clear, because, some people are like, oh, you're not, they keep disputing that you should or you shouldn't, but it is something like, that is, you're supposed to do. You're not supposed to not wear the hijab. So I don't like people changing it to their [own views], because they feel better about it, no, you're supposed to do it. I just don't do it and I don't feel good about it, but I choose it that way. Hopefully God will....

Diane struggled with her decision not to wear the hijab, but continually returned to the challenges she felt it would bring. Diane also discussed the broader meaning of the hijab as modesty,

Because religious-wise you don't have to cover your face, you only cover your face if you're extremely beautiful. Because hijab is just all about modesty. You're just supposed to walk in the street and no one looks at you. So that's why I don't get when [others are] wearing the hijab and you're putting so much makeup on your face. I'm like, just take it off, and take off the makeup, and you'll take the same good deeds, because, it's all about just, not, because we have a lot of rules about, you're not supposed to look at a woman, you're not supposed to look at a man, with lust and all this stuff. So it's all about that, so, it's, you'll see differences in, for example, for the

[part of the] Gulf area, they tend to, you'll see them wearing the stuff on their faces, but that's culture. Everything is culture after covering your hair. But covering the hair and covering the hands, that's actually mentioned in the Quran... Yes, I think, yes, yeah, I'm pretty sure, it's mentioned in the Quran verbatim that you need to cover, and the hair, but after that it is cultural. Like the burqa and all this crazy crap that they do, that's cultural. Um, but the hijab isn't. The religion says, you can even look it up, the Quran says that you're supposed to wear the scarf. Some people, because they feel so bad, they try to justify it, but I don't do that because it's clear that it's stated there. But some scholars would say that it's a less of a, um, well, I believe, that's my opinion, that yes, I'm supposed to wear it, but it's a lot less bad deeds for me because, you know I've reached modesty, but in another way, and I have challenges. And when you have challenges, religion shows that God is merciful and all this stuff, but you don't go and say no it's wrong. It's a line that people cross all the time and I don't like that.

Diane continued on to discuss the complications she viewed regarding the hijab and whether women wear it or not, including the varying cultural views and how she understands them. Diane's understanding and explanation of the hijab is a bit more rigid than that of the other participants, as she clearly states that one should wear the headscarf. Diane spends a significant amount of time researching her own faith and other faiths, and does not make decisions lightly. While her view may be more rigid, it is also more passionate.

Amy has never worn a headscarf in daily life, but does wear one to pray. Amy grew up in Senegal where very few women wore headscarves. Amy discussed her study abroad experience in the United Kingdom (UK) as the first time she was among a Muslim

population of whom the majority did wear the hijab. She said the school that she attended had a large Arab population, and many of the women did wear headscarves. Amy felt that the reactions she received from some were not what she expected,

I used to go to the mosque there, and there was this girl who actually was wearing the hijab, but she's from Somalia or something like that, and it's funny, because coming in like, they'll look at me like, cause yeah they'll see me wearing hijab when I'm going to the mosque, but when I get out I would wear my normal clothes. So, they'll all start looking at me like, seriously? Honestly, what?!? I guess they didn't expect that or something. It's just funny because like here, I go to the mosque and meet people, and when they see you it's like normal, you have the freedom, whatever. They don't really care how you dress or what you put on or not. But, it was challenging, a little bit, but, maybe it's normal to them. It's not to me though.

Amy is an extremely kind person, who is actively exploring her faith and often talked about how much she feels she does not know about Islam and the Quran. Amy was firm in her decision not to wear a headscarf, and she very clearly articulated her reasoning,

Because I decide not to wear a hijab, because, you know, that's not me, that's not, it's not something that is required or that is written in the Quran that you're supposed to, so, even that I'm like, I'm not going to fool myself or fool anybody else just by wearing it in the sake of because I'm a Muslim or because people think that I'm supposed to. I didn't grow up with it, and sometimes, you are under a lot of pressure, like, why are you not wearing it, you're a Muslim, but yeah, maybe before it bothers me a little bit when I didn't know, but then, now that I know that wearing a hijab doesn't make you a good Muslim. Going to the mosque every Friday, praying every

day doesn't make you a good Muslim. A good Muslim is in your heart, and that's all that matters to me. It doesn't matter if I wear a hijab or whatever, that doesn't make me, nobody can stand up and tell me, you're a good Muslim or a bad Muslim, only God knows if I am or not. And I'm just praying that I am going the right way. I was praying that whatever I do is the right thing, but, it's not, I grew up and some people were wearing it, and I didn't. And, um, even when I get to a point in my life where I could do it if I wanted to, but I just see myself not [wearing it]. And I'm just not going to do it because people want me to, and people are judging me, so, I don't know, why would I do it for people? People are not doing it for God, if I'm not doing it for God, why would I do it for anyone else? So. That's exactly why I'm not doing it, because I don't want to. It's not wrong to not do it, there's nothing wrong with it.

When Amy shared her decision-making process and why she doesn't wear it, she talked for a long time about the decision and differing opinions she has heard. I have only included some of her statements above, but I feel it is important to note how much of our interview was devoted to discussing this singular yet complex issue. Just as Diane (and Isha to some extent) devoted thought and consideration to the decision, so did Amy. It was not an easy or carefree decision for Amy. It was a tumultuous decision and one that she still spends time thinking about and considering. No two participants had the same feelings about the hijab or about why they choose not to wear it. It seems to be an element of the Islam faith that is, as discussed in the literature review, widely disputed and not agreed upon. It can, in many cases, represent something different to every individual.

**Food and dining.** Just as there were various opinions and practices among participants regarding observation of hijab, there were also various opinions regarding food



and observation of halal, literally meaning “permissible and lawful under religion” (Jallad, 2008). The Interfaith Council at Midwest University held a forum with University Dining Services in the spring to discuss dining options during Ramadan. The Interfaith Council, on which Diane serves, reported a productive and open conversation. According to the council and Diane, dining services is on its way to making a few changes to be more accommodating for Muslim and Jewish students. Isha, the graduate student, did not have trouble accommodating her diet at Midwest University, but said that is partially because she is a graduate student and because she does not observe halal.

Dining services—again it’s not a big concern to me because I don’t necessarily eat halal food, so I eat even non-halal food. So it’s not a big deal to me but again I can see how it would be. At Ohio State there were no specific or special kinds of diet for the halal eaters, but I think it was a little bit more advantageous because there were restaurants around the campus that would serve that food. So students had a choice; if they didn’t want to eat on campus they could go somewhere else or carry out. Here, I don’t think students have that option except maybe [name of local grocer removed] or something.

When asked about her decision not to observe halal, Isha explained that it is a personal choice and that she did some extensive research before making her decision.

My mom does [observe halal], she is a strictly halal eater, but none of the rest of us did, and we, we would try to kind of investigate whether that was a concern, and, um, in my research and my understanding, and my speaking with scholars about it, I didn’t think it was a restriction, so I didn’t follow it. Basically when we came [to the U.S.], the overall assumption was that you can’t eat food that is not prepared in the

halal way, and the halal way is really that the meat primarily is cut with a certain prayer and a certain kind of procedure. Then, um, I kind of looked around and it said that, well, if you're outside of primarily Muslim countries, turns out that you can eat meat from people that are called "by the book" people. So that would be other Christians or Jews, so monotheistic kinds of religions. And, then it was also in some other places where it mentioned that if you are outside of, again, primarily Muslim countries then those regulations don't apply because there is a limited opportunity for you to have that kind of experience. And so that kind of made me feel, okay, maybe it's not a bad thing or maybe it's not completely forbidden. And I remember, I specifically remember this experience of my brother and I, 'cause he was wondering about the same stuff, going to a mosque and speaking with an Imam about this, and he had basically provided us, um, like an affirmative answer on what we were thinking. That it's not necessarily a restriction here and as long as you, um, basically eat meat that is prepared by people of the book or primarily people of the book, um, you don't really have to abide by those rules. So that was kind of my confirmation that I was seeking, and I'm sure there is a lot of stuff that goes against it, but you always like, there's always confirmation bias, you always stop when you've gotten something that you've thought of initially. So that was my confirmation that I needed and I just kind of lived with it... I mean pork, it's very clear, there are very clear rules about not eating that, so, here, where there are other meat options available, um, I don't see any reason why you would give that up, but again it's a personal choice, some people are okay with that and some people are not.

Isha's thoughtfulness and careful consideration of her decision was clear throughout the interview, as she was cautious to explain all her options and the reasoning behind her decision.

Amy struggles to find food she can eat on campus, and has resorted mainly to chicken. She shared the complexities of finding appropriate food,

Yeah, I can and did eat beef, but I'm always worried about it, because sometimes they'll mix beef and it will be like 1 percent pork or pork skin or whatever. And it's like, "come on, can I get a break?!?" (laugh) So yeah, I just eat chicken.

Amy does not follow halal, which is a term used mainly used by Arabs and Muslims (Jallad, 2008), but absolutely does not eat pork. She addressed her trouble finding proper food with humor, as she did when she discussed "making wudu."

Just as Isha explained the complexities of not following halal if you do not live in a "primarily Muslim country," so did Diane. Diane does not eat pork or drink alcohol, but was happy to explain why she does not feel the need to strictly observe halal,

The stuff you can't eat is written in the Quran clearly. Halal is the one that is disputed on. We say that halal is, you cut it, and you say prayer on it and all this stuff, so, that's agreed upon in the Arab countries, you don't worry about that. But I think our reasoning is that here in the U.S., since they're predominantly Christian (people of the book), then you can eat their food. Some other scholars have said that, well, even if it isn't a Christian, it will give you, if it's not available so much, it will give you a really hard time to try and follow. So I think our scholar said this, that it's such a hard burden on you to try and follow it, we have a saying, it's "your religion should

be something that makes things easier for you, not harder.” So that’s another logic that they can use.

No matter what Diane was explaining to me, she was adamant about pointing out the reasoning and logic “behind” her decision. For the two participants who identified as being from the Middle East, both spent a significant amount of time explaining why they choose not to observe halal, and in both cases it was predominantly because of the environment, both the challenges that one would face trying to observe halal and the availability of halal food. The other two participants did not use the term halal, but did discuss that they absolutely do not eat pork or consume alcohol.

Theme two addressed the way participants expressed their religious identities, and how family and community may have had an impact on current expression. Specifically, prayer, dress, and food were three main topics for all participants, and their current-day practices (or lack thereof) usually related to their families or communities. If they did not, participants often still discussed family and community in explaining their reasoning.

### **Theme Three: The Impact of Environments on Students’ Experiences and Identity**

When participants discussed their identities and why they are “who they are” today, they thought, overall, that much of their identity was closely related to childhood. Most participants experienced a very significant transition when coming to college, as they faced many of the issues traditional college students face as well as a huge shift in a religious support system. Experiences during college, we know, do shape a person. So, when hearing about some of the very negative experiences that some participants have had, it was hard to hear.

**Experiences of racism and xenophobia.** Two of the four participants identified themselves as being from the Middle East (Egypt and Pakistan), and both of those participants explained situations in which they clearly experienced racism, xenophobia, and Islamaphobia (Smith, 2010). Isha was the only participant who was a graduate student (the other three were undergraduate students), and therefore had experienced the environment at two institutions: Ohio State as an undergraduate student and Midwest University as a graduate student. She compared the two institutions she attended,

I will say that perhaps I have been lucky, but when I was at Ohio State I didn't really have any negative experiences with the non-Muslim population, ever. And here [Midwest University], I have had a couple of those. So I think that's a little bit different. And I'm not sure what I can attribute it to other than probably just, well, there's a difference in the amount of diversity there is, so just exposure to people, probably, would make a difference. I mean, I've been, basically, made to feel that, um, basically that you are not part of the larger American identity. And so, I have heard comments, I remember there was a specific experience, I'll tell you about it. Um, we went, some of my friends and I, we went to one of these plays, um, that ISU does, and I forget the name of the play. It was a comedy play, and it was in the Fisher Theater I think. And it was me and a couple of my other friends who were clearly brown, so we looked different. And we were in the aisle, sitting, and it was almost time for intermission or break. And the joke that was previously said right before the intermission was something about, basically saying that you know Bush kind of messed up on agreeing to the war in Iraq or Iran or, it was the war in Iraq at that time. And so everybody laughed, and they were kind of just making a joke about how that

was even a bad mistake and we [as a nation] did that without a lot of knowledge. And so everybody laughed, and so did we. And it turns out in the intermission the guy who was right next to us looked at us and was like, “It wouldn’t hurt you to support our country.” And so, we were like, we were just laughing like everybody else, what’s the big deal? But clearly it wasn’t okay with him that we were laughing. So that’s one experience, but other, subtle experiences have basically made you feel out, basically not part of the larger identity. So that has never ever happened to me, and perhaps I’ve been lucky, because it has happened to some people. But, my first experience with something negative like that was here. And so, I have something bad to attribute because of that.

For Isha, this experience has remained with her, and it was the first experience she can remember where she felt out of place and made to feel “not American.” Isha sought support among faculty and unfortunately, found none. She described the reaction among faculty when she tried to approach them as one of “complete lack of sympathy or complete lack of, even being surprised that it happened.” She expanded upon her efforts to seek support,

And I think that’s probably what hurt me more than the experience itself, is that people don’t think it’s a big deal. So you’re just supposed to brush it off, and if you can’t, then it’s your problem. And so, that experience probably made me a little bit colder and more reserved, and not wanting to basically speak out about those experiences, even if I have them, because clearly no one cares.

Isha also described more subtle experiences, including people asking strange or inappropriate questions. Isha reported feeling, especially during Ramadan, that people felt

the need to “investigate” her behaviors, such as fasting. She said people would say things like, “Oh, you know, I can’t believe you guys have to do that kind of stuff. That’s crazy; why would you want to do something like that?!?” Unfortunately the negative experiences did not stop there for Isha. She also discussed jokes that were made by friends and people she knew, making her feel the need to be silent and not confront them. She explained,

And then there’s like jokes that are just kind of sad and, and it’s all in good fun because it’s people that I know, and that’s fine and all, but I guess I wonder whether it would happen also with someone, I mean I’m okay with it just because I’m friends with these people, or I’m acquaintances with these people, but, I can imagine why that would be uncalled for for someone that doesn’t know them. So I don’t know if those kind of things carry over to people whom they don’t know, but, I mean it happens with me and I kind of brush it off because I’m like, whatever.

I felt Isha was clearly struggling a bit when discussing these jokes, possibly feeling some turmoil about how she really felt about “friends or acquaintances” telling these jokes. Though she pretended it was okay, I got a sense otherwise from her. Isha was not the only participant who was silenced when topics regarding her religion arose. Diane experienced several situations, a few of them in university courses, when the instructor relayed false, or what she felt was misleading, information about Islam:

They’re [professors and teaching assistants] not sensitive enough. It’s like, okay, it makes a lot of sense why you’re talking about Islam, but let’s be educated. Because you have no idea what affect you have when you talk about Islam and you generalize. It’s like me talking about Christianity and talking about the crusades. Really? Are you going to do that to the religion? So there’s no like, oh, by the way. Sometimes in

lectures I would sit there and be like, I really hope that nothing is going to come up that is going to bother me today. Because, it's so easy to get bothered because people aren't sensitive and they don't realize what they're doing, it's like, they talk about Islam and then terrorism, Islam terrorism, Islam terrorism. Of course people are going to associate the two when the professors themselves don't even bother themselves to clarify or talk about it.

Diane was very disturbed by the comments she would hear in classes or when others would misspeak about Islam. Diane felt silenced in class. Being the only Muslim in class accentuated this silencing, as she sometimes felt alone, as though no one else would understand.

Of the four participants, two identified as being from the Middle East, and the other two did not. The two who were from the Middle East both discussed experiencing racism and Islamophobia while the other two did not. While I did not review the current political situation in-depth in the literature review, what I found is that only the participants from the Middle East experiencing this oppression was validated by much of the literature that found an increase in backlash against Muslims since 9/11 (Bryant, 2006; Morlino, 2007; Moskalenko, et al., 2006; Shammass, 2009).

**Peer pressure and feelings of exclusion.** One topic that arose among participants was the way their personal religious choices often would exclude them from the majority culture. The topic of alcohol arose more than once, and Isha expanded on this issue, highlighting experiences in high school, college, and now graduate school:

Oh, back then, in high school, there were all kinds of pressures from peers. Because there were two things, one, I didn't want people to know about my identity, and two,



even if they did, like they didn't really understand it or know what it was and didn't respect it. And so, I had all kinds of pressure basically trying to go out with people, "Why can't you, why don't you?" Blah, blah, blah. And going to dances, wanting to stay out basically when I had a curfew that was much before everybody else's... So, there were pressures a lot more in high school than there were after that. Because again, I think in high school people just don't know. And so, you're trying to fit in, and so you basically give into those pressures a lot more. Um, and oh, I think the craziest one in my life has been "Why don't you drink?" And, that just keeps on coming even now. And, I'm just like, sick of it by now. So I'm just like, "Leave me alone; I don't, just live with it." I go out with my friends to bars, I do, I just want to be with them, I want to be around them in that environment, but it's just like, try a little sip, try this, try that, jokes like, this one doesn't have any but it actually does, and it's like, okay... Yeah, it's getting real old. I've had to deal with that since I was pretty much 16, and so that's getting really old. Yeah, but, other than that, not anything other than that as far as external pressures here, or at OSU, for example. Yeah, and I kind of bring it on to myself too because I do go, so if you didn't go, you wouldn't have to experience that. But I go because I want to be around those people, and I've always done that. My friends in high school, undergrad, even here. Because I think you feel excluded if you don't. It's just something that everybody does here and, so, if you want to be part of a social group you go out to a bar. You just hang out there. And, I'm completely fine with doing that, and going out and hanging out, I just don't want to engage in that one activity, but. And most of the time it's not a problem,

but it does come up, um, almost, I would say, every time I've gone out it comes up.

And even if people know, and, it just, comes up.

Isha even kept her religious identity hidden some during high school, which often brought more questions from peers. She reported, even until today, being in a constant struggle with others regarding her decision not to consume alcohol. While she has made that choice, she will still go to establishments where alcohol is served, and says that she is still pressured to drink, even by those who are aware of her personal choices. This was one aspect of Isha's religious identity that she has always followed, and still others draw attention to this specific choice she has made, which she still struggles with.

Arielle has struggled through college and a professional internship with being around others who seem to consume a lot of alcohol. For Arielle, this is a very important decision.

My roommate, well she was Nigerian too but she was Christian, so she didn't really know a lot about Islam, so she's like (strange look on face), not that she'd be upset about me praying in our room, but she wasn't really too comfortable with it, so, it took a while for us to understand each other on that level. So praying, and, I noticed people in Iowa drink a lot, and I don't drink, so it was kind of weird too going out with my friends. I'm like, they'd all go drink and I'd just be sitting there like, okay...

I never really had much of an interest in it. Even now, I just don't, it doesn't really interest me, so. And I think it's because I grew up around people who don't drink, so I never felt as if I had to, to be able to fit in with the crowd.

Arielle did not grow up around people who drink, and had no desire to do it herself, though she still felt pressured and felt the need to consume alcohol to "fit in with the crowd," though she never did. Arielle, as a construction engineering student, also faced a fairly tragic

situation when she went to do her first professional internship. Arielle took an internship out-of-state, with two other Midwest University students. Upon arriving at the site, the manager and person who would be overseeing them invited all interns and some others from the company to his house for a “barbeque.” Arielle described heavy drinking and was astounded that on one of the first occasions she had interacted with her boss, he was “totally wasted.” This situation left her feeling extremely uncomfortable, to say the least. She also struggled to find a mosque or Muslim community near the internship site, and she described to me why she felt the need to return home,

’Cause, I feel like I was losing a lot of myself being there. Um, and I didn’t really have, they had a mosque there, but it’s hard to find a community that quickly, especially for a 10-week internship. And I felt like I was losing a lot of myself every day, like I wasn’t performing my prayers, um, I was losing hope in a lot of things. I felt like I was missing something. Um, and at first I tried to just be like everyone else, take life easy, everyone takes life easy, but, you try not to put too much influence on religion because people say that the more religious you are the less aware you are of your surroundings. But I realized that’s just not for me. Everyone has a thing that they hold onto, and mine is my religion and my prayers.

Arielle was struggling at this internship, and while her Dad encouraged her to “stick it out,” she described the day she decided to come home,

So I tried it for like two weeks and I, one day I was supposed to go to work and I just didn’t go to work. I called my boss and I’m like, “Yeah, um, I’m gonna go home.”

And he didn’t understand it, and even today people still don’t understand, like, “Why would you just quit an internship? I mean, it’s a good job, they’re paying for all your

housing, your travel”....But I’m like for me, if I’m not comfortable in a situation, if I feel like I’m losing myself, I mean, you can pay me however much you wanna pay me, but if I’m not happy, what’s the point of me being there?

Arielle learned a lot from this experience, and as she is job searching, she has some definite criteria, so that she will accept a position with a company whose professionalism and inter-office gatherings will mesh with her needs.

So, yeah, as far as looking for jobs now, that’s one thing I’m careful of as far as interviewing with companies, like when I talk to the employers I ask them, “Do you guys do a lot of like mixers?” Cause mixers usually involve a lot of alcohol. Or, “Do you guys do a lot of um, like company outings?” Because those usually involve a lot of alcohol and I try to make it that my work life is just work. Like, go to work, and come home. I shouldn’t have to feel like not hanging out with you is going to affect my social standing within the company. So that’s really made me pretty aware of where I want to work. So that’s probably why I haven’t found a job yet, because I’m being so picky. But, I mean, I know what’s best for me eventually, so.

Arielle definitely learned a lesson from that experience and has been able to reflect upon it, but it was nonetheless a painful and emotional experience for her. Arielle also discussed friends and peers at Midwest University who drink, and said that she has to be very conscientious about their plans so she does not end up being the only one who is not drinking.

Alcohol, specifically the non-consumption of it, was a topic that was salient to the two participants who brought it up in our interviews. Both of these participants were older than 21; the two who did not discuss it were not. Shabana Mir (2009) also found that non-

consumption of alcohol tended to be something that Muslim-American undergraduate women experienced that led them to feel not “normal” when among their non-Muslim peers.

As a young immigrant to the United States, Isha discussed how she felt in high school being the only Muslim. During our interview, she chronicled her family relations, from high school to current. Isha explained that not growing up in the school she attended, being the only Muslim and therefore an “other,” forced her to be very close to her family, because they were her only support system. Isha said she did not think she would have been through this struggle had she moved to the U.S. before starting school.

At that point you’re very close to your family because you have no other choice.

You’re not basically accepted as part of the majority culture; you have no one except your siblings and your parents. And I think in high school when I started becoming more accepted by the majority, and I started having an interest in doing those things, I became a little bit distant from my family and my religion and my identity and my siblings, I would say. And I think everyone goes through that I think in high school. And then in college I think it was kind of bringing it back a little bit, and then, by the end of college and within graduate school, I feel like it has completely flipped where I feel like again I am closer to my siblings and my family and my religious and cultural identities... I think it has been nice to have a family that has always supported my decision, whether it was something that they agreed with or not, so I had a very supportive family in that way. They were also supportive in knowing that there are a lot of challenges to growing up here.

Isha’s family was flexible and let her make some of her own decisions regarding her dress for school and how much of her religious and cultural identity she revealed. Isha felt

her family was flexible and understood some of the challenges she faced as a Muslim student in a high school with no other Muslim students (that Isha knew of). For Isha, she went from a high school of no other Muslims to a college where she finally had a community of others who shared her faith. This was not a common experience for all participants. For Arielle, who grew up in a Muslim-Nigerian community, coming to college presented fewer students who shared her faith, not more, as Isha experienced. Arielle described her experience,

Um, well when I first came here I never really knew any Muslims. Yeah, I didn't know any Muslims when I came here. I knew a girl in my class, like I saw her—she wore hijab—but we never really spoke, and she grew up in [city where Midwest University is located] so she already had friends here who she grew up with and came to Midwest University, so I think I went to the mosque like twice, but the mosque here is primarily Middle Eastern, so they all speak whatever language, either Arabic or Urdu if they're Pakistani, um, or Hindi if they're Indian. So, that wasn't even my cultural environment. So growing up, I, I grew up in an environment that was religiously intertwined and culturally intertwined, so I came over here and it's like, yeah, we're all Muslims and we pray to the same God, but the culture wasn't there, and I missed that a lot. So I just felt different.

Arielle experienced a pretty significant difference in religious communities, moving from the Nigerian-Muslim community where she grew up to Midwest University, where she did not find very many Muslims who shared common practices.

Diane follows the traditional gender rules very closely, and has encountered some conflict with roommates over those differences. She described learning to “deal with it” and get along, but it was not always easy,

Just differences in general you [as a roommate] have to accommodate that. But when it's religious reasons, you have to. If it's your preference, you let it go. But, uh, the example I gave you is when they would bring guys over I would have to deal with that. Another example is when I pray, it's, I know it's not, they don't feel offended, but it's, I feel like it's, I would try to pray away from them, because I don't want them to feel like, I don't know what's going on, or I don't know how to act, or what am I supposed to do. So I don't want them to feel uncomfortable, so I just cancel that out by praying somewhere else. So it's not even just that they're uncomfortable, but when you pray it's supposed to be quiet and they don't know that. So, I wouldn't have to deal with that if I lived with someone who knew what was going on. Or with fasting, you know, they're offering food. I don't want to be rude, but...

Diane felt her experience at Midwest University would have been easier if she had lived with another Muslim. Diane is learning to work through the issues and conflicts that she encounters with roommates, but it was something she discussed quite a bit during our interviews.

Isha also described the difficulty of even finding other Muslims at Midwest University,

I think that, um, when I was at Ohio State it was easy to get involved in religious or cultural activities or events, because there were so many people. Which meant that because the organization was so developed there were more events scheduled, there were more opportunities to get involved. Because this is a limited amount of people, what happens is there may be like one, or MAYBE two events organized for the whole year. And so, if you miss that, you don't get to interact with people from that

organization at all. So I think that I miss that because it helped me feel a sense of community with others, and it just kind of helped to, it was just kind of nice to celebrate some kinds of, like, let's say religious holidays or different kinds of cultural events with other people. But here you don't really have the chance to do that. So I look outside of the Midwest University community in order to find people to celebrate those kinds of things with. So, it doesn't, it's not easy, I guess, it would have been much nicer if there were more people, but what are you going to do?

Isha is a graduate student who no longer spends significant amounts of time becoming involved with campus organizations anyway, but she did say when she first arrived at Midwest University it was a challenge to find others who shared her faith. She described the Muslim Student Association as being small and unorganized, and the Pakistani Association being nearly non-existent. She said this was not the main reason that she choose to move away from [city where Midwest University is], but it certainly played a role.

Theme three detailed first the racism and Islamaphobia that two participants discussed, as well as the feelings of exclusion and/or peer pressure related to decisions made regarding religious choices. Participants addressed these encounters differently, but a commonality was that at least one choice that was made (to NOT drink, for example), set participants apart from their peers, leaving them to feel numerous emotions, including “not part of the majority culture,” “not able to fit in,” and uncomfortable. Often these experiences and emotions went unnoticed; in Isha's case, faculty dismissed her and in Diane's case, administrators made her feel she “didn't matter.” These experiences lead to marginality and a decreased sense of belonging to the institution, which can have multiple implications, including a risk of not retaining the student (Rendón, 1994). The students who spoke with



me were the students who were willing to share their experiences and bare their souls about the painful and difficult experiences they have endured. How many other Muslim-American female undergraduate students at Midwest University have shared similar experiences and are still silenced?

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4 I reviewed three themes that emerged regarding Muslim female students' experiences from the data I collected from my interviews with the four participants in this study. The themes discussed were: role of prayer in participants' lives, the influence of family and community in religious identity, and the impact of environments on students' experiences and identity. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the results in light of previous literature and theory, the study's limitations, ethical considerations, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and a brief final personal reflection.

## **CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, AND FINAL THOUGHTS**

This qualitative case study investigated the experiences of four female Muslim students attending a large, Midwestern, research University. The purpose of this study was to better understand how a sample of Muslim women at a large, Midwestern, research university construct their identities, make decisions about personal religious expression, and how the campus climate influences and interacts with the construction of their social identities. Through three interviews with each participant, data were collected and analyzed, and the themes that arose were discussed in Chapter 4. This chapter provides a summary of the study, discussion of the findings in light of previous literature, limitations, implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and final thoughts.

### **Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to better understand how 4 Muslim women at a large, Midwestern, research university construct their identities and how the campus climate influences and interacts with the construction of their social identities. I used a qualitative case study methodology for this study in order to understand how the participants construct their social identities and make meaning of their experiences in the setting of a large, Midwestern, research institution. The three research questions I sought to answer were: How do Muslim women enrolled in a large research institution in the Midwest United States understand and explain the development of their identity? How does the context of the campus environment play a role in the identity development of Muslim women attending a large research university in the Midwest United States? How do Muslim women at a large research university make decisions about the extent to which they participate in Islamic

religious rituals such as wearing a headscarf and adhering to the five pillars of Islam? After completing interviews with the 4 Muslim women and transcribing audio files, I reviewed and open-coded the transcripts. The three themes that emerged most clearly were: role of prayer in participants' lives, the influence of family and community in religious identity, and the impact of environments on students' experiences and identity. These themes were discussed in Chapter 4, and supporting quotes were included. In this chapter, I relate these themes to literature that was reviewed in Chapter 2, discuss limitations of the study, implications for practice as a result of the findings, and recommendations for future research. I conclude with some final thoughts as the researcher.

### Findings

The research questions that guided this study were: 1) How do Muslim women enrolled in a large research institution in the Midwest United States understand and explain the development of their identity? 2) How does the context of campus environment play a role in the identity development of Muslim women attending a large research university in the Midwest United States? 3) How do Muslim women at a large research university make decisions about the extent to which they participate in Islamic rituals such as wearing a headscarf and adhering to the five pillars of Islam?

In this section I discuss findings related to each research question, in light of previous literature and theories.

#### **Research question 1: How do Muslim women enrolled in a large research institution in the Midwest United States understand and explain the development of their identity?**

This research question was broad, but the theme that eventually emerged related to this question was *the influence of family and community in religious identity*. To frame this

research question and understand participants' experiences, I used Jones and McEwen's (2000) model of multiple dimensions of identity and Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) reconceptualization of the first model. The model, as reviewed in Chapter 2, acknowledges the multiple social identities of an individual, and the way those identities may shift in saliency depending on context or life stage. The second rendition of the model added a meaning-making filter. Part of the meaning-making filter illustrated the extent to which external pressures, like stereotypes, influence individuals' perceptions of self. While this model did help to understand participants' experiences and the shifting of identities, I found Omi and Winant's (1994, as cited in Abes et al., 2007) claim to be particularly poignant: "The meanings of social identities cannot be fully captured as they change with evolving contexts and relationships" (p. 2). Participants did not discuss multiple social identities as much as they discussed multiple aspects of their religious identity, such as food, prayer, and clothing. Every participant talked about her family and the role her family and/or community played in her upbringing and "who she is today." One example of how participants explained their own identity development as relying on family or community members was when discussing the *hijab*. None of the participants in this study wore a *hijab*, and they explained that the majority of their families or communities did not wear them, and therefore they did not recognize it as being a conscious decision they made about that aspect of their identity. Context is one of the components of the identity construction process (Abes et al., 2007) that was validated by this study. The context, meaning the place, family, and community in which participants grew up, significantly influenced the identity construction of the participants, and they acknowledged that impact by indicating the role their families and communities had on "who they became."

Participants also highlighted the difference between the context in which they grew up and their current context. Diane said it would be easier for her to practice her religion if she was still in her former setting; Isha said that out of her home context, she is an adult charged with making her own decisions; and Arielle discussed the extreme importance of place and culture to her when choosing a job or graduate school, explaining the impact context has on her happiness and ability to practice her religion.

Based on my data collection and analysis, Isha seemed to have the thickest meaning-making filter, as she was the only participant to discuss making her own decisions once she left home. She explained how ultimately she must make decisions now, as she is an independent person. In this section, I provide examples of the forms of meaning-making that the participants shared.

In discussing the findings of their study, Jones and McEwen (2000) wrote: “When interacting with certain sociocultural conditions such as sexism and racism, identity dimensions may be scrutinized in a new way that resulted in participants’ reflection and greater understanding of a particular dimension” (p. 410). The findings from this study certainly validated Jones and McEwen’s (2000) finding about deeper reflection as a result of a scrutinized identity. As Diane discussed sitting in a classroom where Islam was misrepresented, and as she faced stereotypes of Muslims all around her, she said this situation prompted her to read more about her faith because she needed to know “all the answers.” For her, others scrutinizing her faith, even if not directly to her, forced her to think more deeply and gain a deeper understanding of her own faith. The same is true with Amy, who explored her faith much more in college than she did in high school, partly because of the stereotypes she was experiencing.

Abes et al. (2007) identified three capacities of meaning making: formulaic, transitional, and foundational. In formulaic meaning making, “contextual influences and perceptions of identity are closely connected” (p. 7). Diane sometimes exhibited a formulaic meaning-making capacity, though I think she often exhibited a transitional level of meaning making as well. Diane saw her decision to not wear a *hijab* as not fitting with her religious identity, and talked about how Muslims who come to Iowa State are usually one extreme or the other, meaning (according to Diane), that they either adhere strictly to Islam tenets, or they veer too far off course. Diane usually viewed what Muslims “should do” as being very rigid, without much room for shifting. Her perceptions of Islam were rigid and at times narrow. However, Diane presented her identity differently depending on the context, which is not something, according to Abes et al. (2007), which individuals in transitional or foundational meaning making would likely do.

Abes et al. (2007) wrote that individuals who are in transitional meaning making are “starting to realize the limitations of stereotypes, feel frustrated by identity labels insufficient to describe how they made sense of whom they were, and challenge other people’s expectations that caused difficulties integrating multiple identity dimensions” (p. 9). Arielle’s experiences upon first arriving at Midwest University and how she made meaning of those experiences are great examples of transitional meaning making. Arielle talked about the community in which she grew up and the general context in which she existed,

Oh yeah, that’s part of why I think I was so immersed in my faith and my community because my dad is the imam for our Nigerian Muslim community so every Saturday and Sunday--like during the week I went to school and every Saturday and Sunday I

was in the mosque, either learning how to read the Quran or teaching Arabic to everybody. That was just my life until I came to college really.

Arielle then discussed how the environment at Midwest University created an added challenge for her when she wanted to pray,

But yeah, coming here it was like, you had to focus on like, okay, it's time to go pray, you got to go pray. It's harder when you don't have someone in your ear telling you, "Hey, did you pray already?" So yeah, praying was like, a hard thing for me to get into.

Arielle went on to say that she does pray more now, as it's her way of staying steady and not "getting lost in the chaos." She said that she believes part of the reason she is still close to her faith is because of the family and community in which she grew up. Arielle understands that her family and social identities as a Nigerian and a Muslim both impact who she is today. Arielle explained that when she encountered other Muslims at Midwest University, especially women who wore a headscarf, she was "really offended" because of the lack of friendliness; Arielle felt it was because she was not wearing a headscarf. However, she went on to explain that they probably grew up in environments where that was expected and so she started to understand them, but still was okay with disagreeing on whether a headscarf was necessary. Arielle's ability to peacefully disagree and maintain her own religious practices is an example of a strong sense of self and a transitional, if not foundational, meaning-making filter.

Individuals who have a foundational meaning-making capacity have "a greater ability to determine the relationship between context and perceptions of identity... [they are] adept at resisting stereotypes and typically presented their identity in a consistent manner

regardless of the environment” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 11). Isha is an excellent example from this study of someone who exhibits foundational meaning making. Isha was also the oldest participant and the furthest along in her education, as she was a doctoral student. Isha discussed in depth her decision not to consume alcohol, which is a religious decision. When Isha changes contexts from home to a bar with friends, she still does not consume alcohol. She presents her identity the same in this aspect no matter where she is. Much of what Isha discussed was her identity as a Pakistani and as a Muslim, and how those two fit together and can coexist peacefully. Isha not only discussed how she personally meshes them together, but how she would like to help others to also see how their identities as Muslim and Pakistani fit together. Isha has focused a great deal of her research on how Muslims and Arabs are perceived in the media, and is actively working to break down those negative stereotypes. Isha, through sharing these stories, has shown her ability to resist stereotypes and present her identity consistently, regardless of the context—and she identified the difficulty of this undertaking as well. Isha explained that her family was extremely supportive and allowed her to veer from the “traditional” rules of Islam quite frequently, with the most salient example being wearing a strapless dress and going to a dance. Beyond her family, she explained that during her undergraduate education, she was surrounded by many other people who shared her identity as both a Pakistani and a Muslim, which also influenced her identity development. Understanding the way Isha’s family and community affected her identity development by creating and maintaining what she recounted as a peaceful and supportive environment is important to understand as it supports the implication for providing safe, inclusive, and effective learning environments for students to engage in healthy holistic development and explore the multiple dimensions of their own identities.



**Research question 2: How does the context of campus environment play a role in the identity development of Muslim women attending a large research university in the Midwest United States?**

The theme that emerged as a result of this research question was *the impact of environment on students' experiences and identity*. Racism, misunderstanding, Islamaphobia, lack of support, and struggle were all topics that arose during interviews with participants. The two participants who identified as being from the Middle East experienced significantly more racism and xenophobia than did the other two participants, who did not identify as being from the Middle East. In Chapter 2, I highlighted the literature showing the backlash and targeted racism against Muslim students on campuses since 9/11 (Bryant, 2006; Moskalenko, et al., 2006; Shammass, 2009). The experiences of the students from the Middle East in this study were similar, as they faced overt racism and misrepresentation in the classroom. Bryant (2006) also elaborated on the importance of colleges and universities providing supportive and welcoming environments for students of various faiths and stressed how much the research on religious minority students is lacking in higher education. One implication of this study, which I will elaborate on later in this chapter, is the importance of providing open, safe, and inclusive environments in which students can holistically develop.

The prevalence of Christian privilege emerged during the interviews, though participants did not actually use the term “Christian privilege,” which is defined by Blumenfeld (2006):

[We can understand Christian privilege] as constituting a seemingly invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits accorded to Christians, with which they often unconsciously walk through life as if effortlessly carrying a

knapsack tossed over their shoulders. This system of benefits confers dominance on Christians while subordinating members of other faith communities as well as non-believers. (p. 195)

Most participants in this study faced some challenge during their undergraduate career that was related to their faith. For Isha, it was constantly defending her decision (based on her faith) not to consume alcohol. For Diane, it was the pain of sitting in a classroom where her religion was being misinterpreted, misunderstood, and falsely represented. For Arielle, it was (among other issues), working in an environment where drinking was a regular occurrence in which she felt pressured to engage and excluded when she did not do so. I saw Christian privilege prevail in all their stories, as the struggles they shared were not struggles that a Christian student would likely have faced.

Isha shared that as an undergraduate student at Ohio State University, she was extremely involved in the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and in the Pakistani student organization. She credited both organizations as central to her experience, and she met her husband through the clubs. Isha came to Midwest University for graduate school and was surprised to see the miniscule to nonexistent numbers of students involved in the MSA and Pakistani student association at Midwest University. During Ramadan, both clubs at Ohio State University put on multiple awareness-building programs and community programs for other Muslims and Pakistanis. Isha said she especially misses these clubs and activities during Ramadan. While all three undergraduate students were very active in campus clubs and organizations, only one of them was involved in an organization related to her faith. The MSA at Midwest University has a fairly low turnout for meetings and is “struggling to find enough members” to keep the organization active. While the participants in this study were

not able to compare the MSA at Midwest University to other institutions, they did discuss choosing not to get involved because the club either was non-existent when they arrived at Midwest University or because they were too active in other organizations to commit to another club. It is worth noting that the Christian organizations at Midwest University number more than a dozen, with far more members. The website that lists all campus clubs and organizations does not currently list the MSA under religious/spiritual organizations, either, which could potentially make the organization difficult to find for a new student searching for this organization (University, 2011).

The opportunities that were available on campus influenced what the participants chose to be involved with, and the lack of an organization left some participants with no choices for faith-based organizations. The opportunity to be involved with organizations related to one's faith or religious social identity may influence the way an individual develops over the span of an undergraduate career. College students who are religiously involved are more likely to be involved in community service, exhibit healthier drinking patterns than their non-religious peers, exhibit higher standards of academic integrity, and are consistently stronger in their academic ventures as well (Higher Education Research Institute, 2004; Temkin & Evans, 1998). Therefore, considering the costs of not providing an opportunity for all students, regardless of their faith, to explore this facet of their identity through a club or organization is vital.

**Research question 3: How do Muslim women at a large research university make decisions about the extent to which they participate in Islamic religious rituals such as wearing a headscarf and adhering to the five pillars of Islam?**

The theme that emerged of most relevance to this question was *the role of prayer in participants' lives*. All participants discussed prayer during the interviews. How important it was to them or what role it played in their lives, however, varied among participants. For Isha, the graduate student, it was not a huge focus in her life. For Arielle, Diane, and Amy, prayer was a very important part of their lives, from being a constant in their lives during turbulent times (Amy), to a required and important routine (Diane), to providing a spiritual opportunity to “talk to my creator” (Arielle). *Salat* (prayer) is the second pillar of Islam. For practicing Muslims, this pillar influences daily life more than the others because it requires a pause from daily life, five times throughout the day. Smith (2010) wrote that prayer requires “a total bodily response, both sitting and putting oneself through a series of physical prostrations” (p. 1). Smith’s (2010) finding that prayer is an influential part of a Muslim’s life because of the “total bodily response” required five times a day rang true for the participants who reported actively praying five times a day. Arielle discussed her prayer time as a time when she was excited to “talk to her creator” and as providing moments of peace in her life. Diane described her prayers as a way to “stay on track” with her religious commitments, and discussed the importance of doing her prayers in a quiet and clean place, which was consistent with findings from my literature review (Ba-Yunus & Kone, 2006).

The other portion of this research question dealt with *how* the decision is made to participate or not participate. All participants, with the exception of Amy, discussed current practices as relating to their families’ practices or what they grew up doing. This motivation influenced the emergence of theme two in this study, *influence of family and community in religious identity*, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. I admit that I expected the actual process of deciding what to participate in and what not to participate in to be a more

complicated and in-depth process, but for most participants it was not complicated or convoluted: it was fairly straightforward and related to “the way it has always been” in their families or communities. This is also a limitation, however, of none of the participants in this study choosing to wear the *hijab*.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations in this study that must be addressed. First, the small number of participants, only 4, limits the applicability of this study to other Muslim female students, even at other large, Midwestern, research universities. Other Muslim students, at Midwestern University or other universities, may not share the individual experiences of these 4 participants. The purpose of this study was to more deeply understand participants’ experiences as Muslim female students, and while their stories may inform others of some of the needs and experiences of Muslim female students, findings from this study are not intended to be applied to other students.

Another limitation of this study is the short timeline for data collection. I began data collection on February 28 and completed data collection on March 29. During that month, 12 interviews were conducted and more than 12 hours of interview recordings were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Following each interview, the interview was transcribed, coded, and analyzed before I added to or adjusted questions for the following interview with each participant. As stated earlier, I met with each participant three times, for approximately an hour per interview. If the data collection had been more in depth, other experiences may have been shared. For 3 of the 4 participants, the first interview was spent mostly building a relationship, and many of the salient experiences were then addressed in the second and third interviews. As the participants grew more comfortable with me, they shared more. This

relationship building was especially important because I do not share a religious identity with my participants, and my out-group membership was salient to me, as well as to my participants. While they were gracious in sharing their time, lives, and stories, I believe if this were a long-term study with more interviews, our relationships would have continued to deepen, and more rich data may have been gathered.

Prior to identifying participants, I expected that I would have at least one participant who wore the *hijab*. None of my participants did wear the *hijab*. I wrote my research questions prior to recruiting participants, and therefore research question three, which asked about how participants made the decision to wear or not to wear the *hijab* was only answered based on individuals who choose not to wear it. In several interviews, however, participants commented that those who do wear the *hijab* have a vastly different experience than those Muslim women who choose not to do so. I also suspect that interviewing participants who do wear the *hijab* may provide another viewpoint not addressed in this study; a point that I will expand upon later in this chapter, when discussing recommendations for future research.

### **Implications for Practice**

There are several implications for practice for student affairs professionals, faculty, and teaching assistants as a result of this study. First allow me to reiterate that I began this study because of a lack of literature and understanding of Muslim students. I was in a class that was part of a master's course sequence to prepare student affairs professionals when I completed a pilot study on Muslim students and struggled to find any literature on the experience of Muslim students. The lack of information available about the experience of Muslim students was startling. I wondered why there was so little research on this student population, especially compared to other minority populations. I also realized in the process

of my own research how little I knew about Islam as a religion. For me, this was a moment of awakening and shame at knowing so little about another faith and a population of students that I may serve someday as a student affairs professional. With my own shortcomings being acknowledged, I think one of the most important implications for practice is to ensure that student affairs professionals are educated, that they educate the students with whom they work on perspectives other than their own, and that interfaith programs are supported. Most of my participants were very aware of the roots of Christmas and other Christian holidays. We must work toward being as aware of religious holidays other than our own to pay them the same respect as is automatically given to Christian religious holidays.

The two participants who identified as being from the Middle East both shared how they often felt misunderstood and/or stereotyped. One student reported finding no support among faculty members after facing an incident where she was the victim of overt racism, and the other sat through lectures during which participants felt that information about Islam and its followers was not conveyed in a respectful or even accurate way. Both of these findings have significant implications for student affairs staff and faculty members. Professors and teaching assistants must ensure that they have an accurate understanding of Islam, especially when facilitating discussions with classes regarding the religion or a discussion in which the topic of Islam may arise. Misrepresenting the religion or its followers can lead students who identify as Muslims to feel or be silenced in the classroom, which may have multiple consequences, one being a negative effect on the learning of Muslim students in the classroom. Feeling silenced in the classroom can lead to less engaged learning. According to Baxter Magolda (2000), a fundamental component of teaching in a way that allows holistic student development to happen is creating an inclusive learning

environment. Baxter Magolda defined inclusive and effective learning environments as “environments in which opportunities for complex cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development exist for all students” (p. 94). When Diane shut down and could not concentrate because of the way the teaching assistant portrayed her faith, she was not learning in an effective learning environment. Student affairs professionals, faculty members, and teaching assistants must ensure that an inclusive and effective learning environment, one free of stereotypes, racism, and prejudice, is present for students of all faith groups. This environment must be fostered and nurtured because its presence is very important to the holistic learning and development of college students (Baxter Magolda, 2000).

For teaching assistants to actively create an inclusive and effective learning environment for all students, preparation classes could be designed for the teaching assistants. The course sequences in most higher education programs include student development theory and a course on campus environments, both of which could be useful to anyone teaching students in the classroom. If semester-long classes on student development or environment are not a possibility for teaching assistants, the creation of a multi-day teaching workshop that highlights the importance of a safe, inclusive, and effective learning environment for students could be a step in the right direction.

Another implication for student affairs professionals and advisers of faith-based student organizations is to be aware of the importance of interfaith conversations for students to understand and respect one another. Patel and Brodeur (2006) wrote about the importance of discussing various religious identities, and noted that as a result of formal and informal programs designed to do this, pluralism could emerge as a result. Patel and Brodeur (2006)



wrote, “Learning to talk about the variety of religious identities, among many other kinds of overlapping identities, requires active and self-reflective interfaith activities” (p. 3). Perhaps more programming or dialogue could be included in specific faith-based organizations, such as the Catholic Student Association or MSA. Learning to discuss religious identities other than one’s own is a step toward creating a safe and active learning environment. Dialogues and activities that bring together various faith-based groups would be a movement in the direction toward pluralism and understanding, which are both important for creating a safe and effective learning environment, and for holistic identity development for students of all faiths.

The participants in this study all identified as Muslim, but there were vast differences among them and their practices and beliefs. As student affairs professionals, it is important to be aware that the experience of one Muslim student may not resemble the experience of another, as there are vastly different practices and beliefs among the various divisions of Islam, as well as among Muslims from different parts of the world. Examples of differences evident in practice might be the presence or absence of the *hijab*, observation of *halal* food, importance of *Ramadan*, or the interaction between women and men. Even if a professional is unaware of all the differences among various divisions in Islam, being aware that there are differences and not assuming anything about a student who is Muslim is important in order to provide students with a safe and open space.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are prolific opportunities to explore and inquire about the lived experiences of Muslim students. This study investigated the experiences of undergraduate female Muslim students attending a large, Midwestern, research institution. Other studies could investigate

the experiences of students in other geographical settings and types of institutions. Other studies could also focus on a more specific population of Muslim students; for example, students who identify as being Muslim AND from the Middle East. There is also very little data available on the experiences of male Muslim students, which would be another area for investigation.

During my data collection process, I encountered a woman who had converted to Islam from Mormonism. We met to discuss her experience and she shared that she is one of many, many individuals who have converted. Exploring some of the college experiences of those who convert to Islam from another religion or who leave Islam prior to or during their higher education career is an untapped area of research. I also feel, having completed this study, that more research is needed to explore how Muslims and Arabs are portrayed in specific higher education settings, such as classrooms and residence halls. Much of the research that currently exists about the portrayal of Muslims has looked at the portrayal of Muslims in the media, not in higher education settings such as classrooms and residence halls (Saleem, 2008). Many investigators (Armstrong, Neuendorf, & Brentar, 1992; Fujokia, 1999; Zillman, 2002; Zillman & Brosius, 2000; as cited in Saleem, 2008) have found that even limited exposure to stereotypes in the media can still lead individuals to form opinions or beliefs about those groups of people who are being stereotyped. Being aware of the research about media and stereotypes is important for faculty members, student affairs professionals, and teaching assistants in order to be informed about what thoughts or beliefs some students may have about minority groups, especially when exposure to that group has previously been low. Understanding potential prejudices that students may hold will allow

for appropriate programming and class lessons to correct misconceptions and move past these prejudices.

### **Final Thoughts**

Proposing and completing this thesis has been a process that has been exhausting, exhilarating, challenging, rewarding, humbling, and transformative. Writing and collecting data while also working 30 hours a week and taking classes has given me a glimpse into what I imagine the life of a faculty member might be—a never-ending work-life balance juggle. Certainly for me it was a challenging task, and a process that provided me with an opportunity to improve my own research and academic writing skills, in addition to evaluating priorities in life.

Listening to the participants' stories and building relationships with them was by far the most rewarding and transformative aspect of this project. I cannot adequately express my gratefulness to them for taking the time to sit with me and talk about very personal aspects of their lives. I have learned more than I could ever hope to express in this thesis, and I will forever remember what they shared with me. This project allowed me to delve into a topic that interests me both professionally and personally, which made the topic that much more interesting. Newfound interests in the areas of interfaith dialogue and pluralism stemmed from this project, and the value and importance of personal experiences, stories, and relationships reinforced my own epistemological stance.

While this study related to personal and professional interests, it was also a relevant topic for the current time period and state of our society, considering the political situation and our occupation of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in the news, and the hate crimes committed against Muslims since 9/11. Especially because of the

current political context, my discussions related to this research that I have had with family, friends, and acquaintances have, I hope, made some difference in those individuals' lives and opinions. It is my hope that conversations about this research have engaged others in critical thinking and influenced how they talk about and treat those unlike themselves. My findings may not have been as succinct and “neat” as I may have expected them to be or hoped they would be—but what I have gained from this research and what I hope to give back as a result of this process matter far more than the results fitting succinctly into categories and appropriate literature.

I cannot express my gratitude enough directly to the participants in this study for sharing their lives and stories with me, but I do pledge to continue my own social justice journey in my work and personal life. These 4 women have been a part of my own growth and journey more than they know.

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**APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Dear (Participant's Name):

My name is Allison Severson and I am a graduate student at Iowa State University. I am writing to let you know that a research study is being planned that may be of interest to you; the study is about the experiences of Muslim women. You have been identified as a potential candidate for the study and it is possible that you may be eligible to participate in this study. Your eligibility can only be determined by the investigator of this study, me.

Please be aware that, even if you are eligible, your participation in this or any research study is completely voluntary. There will be no consequences to you whatever if you choose not to participate, and your regular academic endeavors will not be affected by that choice. If you do choose to participate, the study will involve a series of three interviews and a focus group on your experiences as a Muslim woman in a U.S. college setting.

In order to determine your eligibility and your interest in participating, you can email me back at [aseverson@iastate.edu](mailto:aseverson@iastate.edu). You may choose not to respond to this email. If you do respond, any questions you have about the study will be answered.

Of course, if you have any questions for me, please contact me.

Allison J. Severson  
Graduate Student  
515.851.7820  
[aseverson@iastate.edu](mailto:aseverson@iastate.edu)

## **APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**

**Title of Study:** Muslim Women: A case study of social identity construction **Investigators:** Allison J. Severson

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this study is to better understand how a sample of Muslim women at a large, Midwestern, research university construct their identities and how the campus climate influences and interacts with the construction of their social identities. You are being invited to participate in this study because you have been identified as meeting the following criteria: (a) identify as a Muslim, (b) identify as a female, (c) a student at Iowa State University, a large, Midwestern, research university. You should not participate if you are under the age of 18 or are currently enrolled in graduate level coursework.

### **DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a series of three in-depth interviews, lasting approximately 90 minutes each, as well as one focus group, which will also last approximately 90 minutes. Each participant will be asked to participate in all three interviews. The interview series will consist of three interviews because each interview will focus on a different topic. The first interview will focus on background experiences prior to coming to college, demographic information, and religious practices in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. The second interview will focus on experiences in college as they relate to identity development, what aspects of identity are most important to the participant. The focus group will take place between the second and third interview and will focus on the campus environment. The third interview will be a concluding interview and may bring up topics from the second interview or the focus group. The third interview will partly be about meaning making and how the participants have made meaning of aspects discussed in the first and second interviews and during the focus group. The involvement in this study will last for approximately one month- six weeks. Interviews will be one- two weeks apart, and each interview may last for up to a maximum of 90 minutes.

### **RISKS**

The risks of participating in the interviews are no greater than they would be in your daily life.

### **BENEFITS**

If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefit to you. A benefit is defined as a “desired outcome or advantage.” I hope that the information gained in this study will benefit society by filling a void in the research on Muslim women in American higher education. There is very little available literature about the experiences of Muslim female undergraduate college students in the Midwest United States. By participating in this study, you will have an opportunity to reflect upon your experiences.

### **COSTS AND COMPENSATION**

You will not have any costs from participating in this study and you will not be compensated for participating in this study.

### **PARTICIPANT RIGHTS**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information. To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: All interviews and the focus group will be recorded. I will keep the audio files on my personal computer, which requires a password to access. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym that will correspond to the interviewee's audio file from interviews. Once the study has been completed, all transcriptions will be kept on my personal computer, and the consent forms will not be kept electronically. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

### **QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS**

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Nancy Evans at 515.294.7113
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

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### **PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE**

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

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(Participant's Signature)

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(Date)